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The Grateful Marimbist:

Spencer Technique and the Marimba Music of Julie Spencer

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The Grateful Marimbist

Spencer Technique and the Marimba Music of Julie Spencer

by

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The Grateful Marimbist:

Spencer Technique and the Marimba Music of Julie Spencer

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This treatise is an examination of the marimba solo literature and playing techniques of Julie Spencer. Ms. Spencer has composed fourteen solos for marimba in which she incorporates elements of jazz improvisation, world music, and a number of her own techniques which she collectively refers to as "Spencer Technique". The treatise begins with a biographical background of Ms. Spencer and her career. This is followed by a chapter dedicated to examining her unique techniques for marimba. These techniques are demonstrated through the use of video segments imbedded in the document which is in html format. The treatise then examines each of her fourteen solos providing both an introductory survey and addressing special technical demands relating to her playing techniques.

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Introduction

The marimba as a solo instrument has had a relatively short existence as compared to the rich solo traditions of the violin or piano, for example. Until fairly recently, solo literature choices were rather limited. The solo marimbist of today however, is fortunate. The last few decades have seen rapid growth in the number of marimba solos written by both percussionists and composers, and there exists today a wealth of solo literature from which to choose. Yet with so much new solo literature appearing in such a short time, it is inevitable that any number of works may get overlooked and fail to enter the repertoire mainstream. Part of the intent of this treatise is to increase awareness of the solo marimba compositions of Julie Spencer. In her solo marimba compositions there exists a small wealth of literature: fourteen solos composed between 1983 and 2000 of varying length and technical difficulty. A number of these solos are heard on her solo recording of 1991, entitled "Ask".

But it is not just Julie Spencer's solo marimba compositions themselves that deserve attention but her overall approach to marimba technique as well. And therein lies the reason for this document's digital format. Julie Spencer's marimba compositions are especially important in light of the unique technical aspects of her own playing, all of which have been incorporated into a number of these solos, and a knowledge of which are crucial to being able to perform these pieces.

In 1992 I was able to study marimba with Julie Spencer. During that year and over the course of subsequent years I became familiar with both her marimba compositions and playing techniques. In addition, I got to know her as a friend. I believe that this relationship has given me a special insight and familiarity into her music and

techniques, and in an attempt to share with the reader that insight I have chosen to include a number of my own personal experiences from my study of her music and techniques. I conducted a number of interviews with Ms. Spencer and many of the quotations in this treatise are taken from these personal interviews.

Traditional techniques for playing the marimba have been extensively examined in other documents and are the primary techniques taught by teachers of percussion. Therefore, this treatise does not spend much time on those techniques and instead focuses on Ms. Spencer's unique and individual approach playing the marimba. This treatise is not a comparison of method books or styles, other than to point out differences, and as it provides an introductory survey of Ms. Spencer's solo marimba literature any coverage of this literature would be incomplete without an in-depth analysis of her techniques.

As teachers, we often recommend to our students, pieces with which we are familiar ourselves, and approaches to the music that we are comfortable with as performers. A small number of solos tend to get played often, in part because they are good pieces of music and are enjoyable to play but also because we as teachers, having studied them ourselves, know how they are supposed to be played with regards to technical and musical considerations. I feel that were more percussion teachers and their students aware of Julie Spencer's music and her particular approach to marimba technique, more of those students would play and enjoy playing her music. This is not to say that her marimba techniques should replace traditional techniques, but rather that her methods can be considered further refinements of those techniques and are being examined merely as the unique approach of one woman to the art of playing marimba.

It is my hope that this document will provide the reader with a greater understanding of the diverse musical and personal background of Julie Spencer, which has strongly influenced her compositions, both musically and programmatically. It is my hope that this document will be of use to teachers of percussion and their students who may be interested in learning more about Ms. Spencer's music and techniques, functioning in the manner of a method book and helping to codify Julie Spencer's unique marimba techniques, and lastly to disseminate a general knowledge and appreciation of her compositions for solo marimba.

Chapter 1: Biography

In 2001 Julie Spencer and her husband, German composer and ethnomusicologist Gernot Blume, returned from a sabbatical in Strasbourg, France. The purpose of this trip for both her and her husband was solely to compose music. A new web site has been created for their joint publishing company Spencer-Blume Publishing, which contains works written for solo marimba, piano, percussion, voice, choir, chamber and jazz ensembles, string quartet, string orchestra, and full orchestra. The fact that composition is now the main focus of Julie Spencer's musical career lies in sharp contrast to the statement she gave interviewer Patrick Wilson in 1987. Though she had already been performing a number of her own compositions by this time (her first solo marimba pieces were actually composed while she was in high school), she expressed to Wilson that she felt uncomfortable being labeled a composer, adding that "composition has the connotation of effort and work" [12]. She explained later to me that for her, writing music has always been an emotionally freeing experience, seldom feeling like work [6]. Does she now think of herself as more a composer than a marimbist? Rather does she just feel more "comfortable" with that label? Even as recently as 2000 she was "more interested in working with the hundreds of pieces we've already written", rather than "hearing things as marimba solos anymore, written beginning to end". But what at first seems to be a contradiction is really a fulfillment of what Ms. Spencer already knew in high school: "three things would be integral to whatever career in music took shape: performing as a solo marimbist, composing, and performing as an improviser" [3].

Julie Spencer burst on to the percussion scene after her first appearance at the Percussive Arts Society International convention in 1985, where she gave a concert

mainly of her own pieces for solo marimba and introduced the audience to her technique that she referred to at the time as her "horizontal technique" or the "horizontal concept" of marimba. It is essentially a two-mallet technique that involves rotating the mallet outward from the wrist in a sort of "windshield wiper" motion and, with enough relaxation in the forearm and wrist, allows for both wide interval leaps and one mallet rolls, or tremolos. At this convention, after performing a well known four-mallet marimba solo (one of the few works she has performed that is not her own, Gordon Stout's *Two Mexican Dances*), with only two mallets, and utilizing the "horizontal technique", Ms. Spencer's visibility as a marimbist rose. Soon she began receiving invitations as a guest artist and clinician, in part based on her horizontal concept, and with a sort of notoriety as "that woman who does the one handed-roll."

The one-mallet roll is much like a piano trill, allowing either a single pitch or a dyad to be sustained in one hand, while another musical line is being played in the other hand. For the marimba, an instrument having no means of sustain other than the roll or tremolo, this opens up numerous compositional and expressive possibilities, and a more detailed analysis of this technique will ensue in chapter 2 of this document. It is, in fact, Ms. Spencer's piano background, which in part led her to develop this technique. Having begun piano lessons at the age of five, and continuing studies through college, she confesses that "I always wanted the marimba to be something else, to sound like something else, to be able to do things it can't do. For the hands and mallets to do things that I didn't see other hands and mallets doing, which is where the one mallet roll came from" [3].

Ms. Spencer cites her mother as having encouraged an early interest in piano, and it was her older sister Nancy, a percussionist who later switched her college major from music to psychology, who exposed Ms. Spencer to the marimba [12]. Because of Nancy's percussion studies Ms. Spencer had the good fortune of having access to a small three-octave marimba at age nine, and then a full-size concert grand marimba by the time she reached sixth grade [12]. The result was that she was starting to play college-level marimba repertoire by the time she was in eighth grade. Not only was Ms. Spencer playing solo marimba literature, but she was already composing for the instrument by this time as well. She generally disliked [3] the music she had to play in high school with piano accompaniment, so when she was fourteen she composed "Color Suite" for a percussionist she met in the Indiana All-State Orchestra. One year later at age fifteen she composed her first commission, "Xylophone Etude No.1" for a friend auditioning for the Drum Corps International keyboard solo competition.

Along with the marimba, the piano continued to remain central throughout her early teen years, and at this age Ms. Spencer thought that she would go to a conservatory to study piano after high school. This relationship is important I feel, because this sort of "fusing" of the two instruments was already informing Ms. Spencer's marimba technique and compositional ideas of what the marimba could and could not do. As she admitted in a 1986 interview, "whether consciously or not, my piano background played a strong part in expanding my thinking about the possibilities of the marimba" [11]. It was not until she was fifteen that she started focusing her interests more on marimba, encouraged by her high school percussion teacher Jeff Nearpass [3]. About this same time she began

thinking of attending the Eastman School of Music after high school, and she would soon be exposed to the marimba's potential as a solo instrument.

At age sixteen she had the good fortune to hear Gordon Stout perform on solo marimba and remembers being impressed by how relaxed and completely confident he was playing the instrument [12]. A subsequent performance by the xylophone virtuoso Bob Becker, noted for his adroit, fluid style, further impressed upon Ms. Spencer this quality of effortlessness. These elements of relaxation and effortlessness would later become a key element in Ms. Spencer's own technique, and remains to this day a focus of her teaching, through private lessons, clinics, and workshops.

At this same time she was experiencing a diversity of music not only as a budding marimbist, but also as an improvisor and composer. She played drum set in her school jazz band, vibraphone in a Dixieland jazz combo and keyboards in a rock band, which won a radio contest performing their arrangement of a piece she composed for keyboard titled "Amethyst". In addition she was a church pianist performing solo piano improvisation each week for the Sunday morning preludes and postludes. Ms. Spencer also worked in high school as a freelance percussionist with local theatre groups, orchestras, concert bands, and new music ensembles, performing such contemporary repertoire as Peter Maxwell Davies' *"8 Songs for a Mad King"* when she was only fifteen years old. This diversity of musical styles is a common thread in Spencer's life and one that will be explored throughout this paper.

Compositionally, Ms. Spencer cites the marimba and vibraphone artist Bill Molenhof as a major influence at this time in her life "because I heard Bill doing so much really interesting music that he had written" [12]. Molenhof is noted for performing his

own compositions mostly in a jazz trio format. In addition he is the composer of a number of solo and duo works for vibraphone and marimba that feature jazz harmonies and tuneful melodies. Since the mid-nineteen eighties Molenhof's works have long been a mainstay of percussion recital literature, and he has been a frequent clinician and concertizer.

When Ms. Spencer did begin studies at the Eastman School of Music, with a scholarship, in 1980, her major was ultimately percussion and not piano [3]. Here she began general percussion studies with Professor John Beck, though she confesses that "the first year at Eastman I spent more time improvising at the piano than practicing percussion" [12]. But Beck required "competency in all areas of percussion" [11] so Ms. Spencer decided to stop playing the piano for almost a year, instead focusing her attention towards general percussion studies including two-mallet marimba literature, an idiom to which she was at the time fairly unaccustomed, having adopted very early on a four mallet marimba grip. The basic idea for the horizontal technique that she was to premiere at the Percussive Arts Society convention in 1985 would be born out of her two-mallet practice at this time in her life. She related that

> I didn't do too much two-mallet music until I got to Eastman. I was thinking 'What can I do to make the marimba more fun?' And I was trying to think of all the crazy things that I could do on the marimba. It just occurred to me that it would be possible to roll with one mallet, because if your hand was loose enough...you could hold a mallet…and you could do a roll [11].

Yet it was not only a desire to make two-mallet practice "more fun" but a practical desire to play an assigned etude as fast as she wanted that would eventually lead to her rethinking of two-mallet technique. Many undergraduate percussion students, myself included, have played Claire Omar Musser's *Etude in A flat,* Op. 6, No. 2 and she realized that "because of the tempo I wanted to take the piece, that relaxation was very important" [11]. This led to a series of exercises she created, which in turn would lead to a combination of ideas that would form the basis for her horizontal concept.

The A-flat etude is a moto-perpetuo style work requiring the performer to quickly arpeggiate numerous triads and seventh chords, mostly in thirds, with several sections though, requiring larger intervalic leaps in each hand. (See Fig. 1.1)

Fig 1.1 *Etude in Ab*, Op.6, No.2, mm.15

The augmented fifth intervals between the right hand "on the beat" sixteenth notes lend themselves well to Ms. Spencer's horizontal concept of rotary motion. As John Beck has noted, the technique "really does have a great deal of accuracy built into it" [12] whereas the other style of moving the whole arm to a different position by pivoting at the elbow or shoulder rather than wrist, "does sometimes become a little inaccurate" [12]. In order to test the validity of this new technique Professor Beck off-handedly challenged Ms. Spencer to play Gordon Stout's *Two Mexican Dances* for marimba, a work composed for four mallets rather than two. The work features an Alberti-style left hand accompaniment of eighth notes over a right hand melody harmonized a sixth below in

double stops. *Two Mexican Dances* is a challenging piece with four mallets, and is an advanced percussion recital mainstay. To perform it with two mallets would be considered nearly impossible: to do it in a public performance could indeed lead to the sort of notoriety which Ms. Spencer would later reluctantly attain. At the following week's lesson with Beck, Ms. Spencer did indeed master the first *Dance*, with two mallets, and the second *Dance* a few weeks after that. Of this technique, which she would later demonstrate on her program at the 1985 convention, she says that "it started with a hypothesis and then I set out trying to prove it" [3]. Ultimately both the technique and degree of relaxation required to achieve this would lead her to develop both the one mallet roll and her earliest published piece *Cat Clock II*.

Begun originally as a set of technical exercises to aid in the development of her new ideas on two-mallet technique, *Cat Clock II* was also on the 1985 Percussive Arts Society convention program. Yet for Ms. Spencer, the movements required to perform *Cat Clock* were much larger than the piece itself, as they began to inform and shape both her four-mallet marimba playing and composing. The degree of relaxation needed to perform these movements would ultimately lead her to a re-examination of not only her two-mallet technique, but four-mallet technique of the time as well. "Although I had been doing four-mallet stuff all along, there wasn't anything different technically, until after the one-mallet roll came together", and she is quick to add that "and then the door just flew open" [3].

These discoveries though would come at a cost to Ms. Spencer, and it would eventually be John Beck, who would help to resolve a difficult time in her life. In the fall of 1984 Ms. Spencer was granted an informal leave of absence from Eastman with a

guaranteed spot and scholarship to return. She had already been awarded her performer's certificate based on her audition for it during her junior year, yet during her leave of absence she was made to re-audition for the certificate by the school. During her leave of absence, not having access to many of the percussion instruments required for the audition meant that Ms. Spencer consequently had a disappointing re-audition and was denied her performer's certificate. "It was one of the biggest blows to my confidence" she says, and though she knew it was a risk taking time off from school, Ms. Spencer felt strongly that she needed "concentrated marimba time to practice the marimba techniques I was just beginning to develop" [5].

It was during this year that Ms. Spencer's concepts for the horizontal technique and one mallet roll "all came together, as I knew it could with the right kind of work", though she adds that she also needed "some growing up time" as well [3]. In addition to focused practice on marimba during this year, Ms. Spencer also played drums and sang in a "top 40" style band, and although Ms. Spencer herself was always sure of her direction and dedication to developing her two-mallet concepts, and returning to Eastman, both her father and John Beck were concerned that she might get distracted from finishing school.

Ms. Spencer did return the following year, in the fall of 1985, and after a week back at school she was asked by Professor Beck to give her first master class on her two-mallet concepts for the other Eastman percussion students. But following this triumph of sorts was her failed performer's certificate re-audition, and she feels that even today many of her college peers may be of the impression that she never received the certificate. Taking issue with the requirement that Ms. Spencer re-audition in the first place, John Beck combed the files of former Eastman students and found someone from

decades earlier who took a similar leave of absence as Ms. Spencer did, and was not made to re-audition. He then lobbied Ms. Spencer's case to the school of music administration, based on the precedent of this older file, and was, in effect, able to nullify Ms. Spencer's second audition and allow her first to stand, thereby restoring her performer's certificate status.

Two months later she would present her two-mallet concepts to a much larger forum, at the 1985 Percussive Arts Society International Convention in Anaheim, California. She would go on to earn her bachelor's degree from Eastman in the spring of 1985, and with Beck's guidance and support Ms. Spencer began building a career as a solo marimbist. It was he who had arranged an audition for her both with the Kori Marimba Company, who would be her eventual sponsor, and the host of the 1985 convention, Jay Wanamaker, when she was a senior at Eastman.

She had still been composing for the marimba since *Color Suite*, building a growing body of original solo literature, and it was during her undergraduate years that in addition to *Cat Clock* several four-mallet works were written. Four etude-like works were combined to form her *Children's Suite*, and a four-mallet solo performed on her 1985 Anaheim program titled *Hershey Bar Rag* (1983) was also composed during this time. With the part that a relaxed physical approach to the instrument played, Ms. Spencer's thinking was becoming more and more pianistic, as her technique "grew to accommodate it" [3].

Following the success of her 1985 clinic at the Percussive Arts Society convention, she was asked to perform again in 1986, where interviewer Patrick Wilson was "surprised by her improved presentation, and most impressed by the total experience

of Julie as performer, composer, and clinician" [12]. She was specifically asked by convention host Garwood Whaley to perform an identical program to the one performed in Anaheim the previous year (this year's convention being held on the east coast), demonstrating her two-mallet techniques and the four-mallet *Hershey Bar Rag* and *Children's Suite*.

The next three years saw her touring throughout the U.S, Canada, and Europe presenting concerts and master classes. As she began receiving this international exposure and just when it seemed a promising solo marimba career might be in her future, Ms. Spencer decided to enroll at the California Institute of the Arts, receiving a full scholarship. This marked an important part in her musical life for two reasons, I believe. By choosing to enroll in school, she was to a large degree reducing her visibility from the clinic/concert circuit, though not necessarily turning her back on it completely. Similarities exist between this situation and the year she spent away from Eastman concentrating on the marimba. Secondly, the broad range of musical and personal experiences she would encounter at Cal Arts would forever change her as a marimbist, composer and improvisor.

The California Institute of the Arts is noted for both its diversity of world music curriculums and its strong jazz program. It offers instruction in areas as diverse as North and South Indian Classical music, West African drumming and dance, Afro-Cuban music, Balinese gamelan, and jazz improvisation, composition, and arranging. After three years of focusing her efforts on solo marimba concerts and workshops, Ms. Spencer felt that "studying those instruments and the music from those cultures would profoundly affect me as a composer" and "broaden my stylistic choices playing the marimba" [3].

Here at Cal Arts she was able to study tabla, African drumming, jazz harmony, composition, and improvisation, Balinese and Javanese gamelan, and play in a wide diversity of world and contemporary ensembles not found at many other, more traditional, universities in the U.S. during this time period. Knowing that pursuing a master's degree, teaching at Cal Arts, and immersing herself in the study of tabla, jazz, and the music of other cultures would require a major commitment, Ms. Spencer stopped seeking marimba tours.

Though she did not stop completely playing or composing for the instrument, it was during her time at Cal Arts that Ms. Spencer felt as though she really began to develop as a composer. "The main thing I learned at Cal Arts was how to write and edit what I write, and hear other people write" [3], adding that she also learned to write "lead sheet" style pieces, and arrangements for small groups and chamber ensembles. Several of her pieces were recorded with various Cal Arts student jazz ensembles, including the compositions *Bahia* in 1990, and *Tribeca Sunflower* in 1992. *Tribeca Sunflower* has become one of her most well-known pieces, and is now published in both a solo marimba and percussion quartet version. *Bahia*, and Gernot Blume's *Waiting to Come Back*, both from the Cal Arts Jazz Program's 1990 Capitol Records recording, feature Ms. Spencer playing the vibraphone and hand percussion, and marks an early collaboration between Blume and Spencer, begun in 1988 that continues to this day. This also marks an important point in Ms. Spencer's compositional style as many of her works for marimba solo composed after this time period include improvisation.

Julie Spencer's debut recording of early 1992 entitled "Ask" contained a number of pieces now published in both lead sheet and solo marimba format. Reviewer Chuck

Berg, in JazzTimes magazine stated that the music on "Ask" "obtains a uniqueness based on her unusual intervallic leaps and displaced yet supple (and swinging) rhythms" [2]. Some of the published solos from "Ask" contain transcribed sections that on the recording were originally improvised sections. Other published solos from "Ask" are composed pieces containing "open" sections for improvised solos if the performer so chooses.

"I started learning jazz standards, and that really affected how I wanted to play and write" [3], and by now not only the composed pieces were being informed by improvisation, but Ms. Spencer's concerts and clinics as well. I first saw and heard Julie Spencer in performance at the 1991 Percussive Arts Society convention in Anaheim, California, performing a number of the marimba solo pieces that would be on the "Ask" recording of the following year. I remember being attracted to the both the strong melodic nature and rhythmical pulse of her playing and compositions. This same concert/clinic (she also answered questions, mainly of a technical nature, from the audience) featured the mixed ensemble "Colored Fish" performing *Tribeca Sunflower*, and using the same instrumentation as the Cal Arts 1992 recording, featuring Ms. Spencer on marimba, Gernot Blume on sitar, Pedro Eustache on woodwinds, and Dan Morris on percussion. "Colored Fish" represented what today might be termed a "world music" ensemble and represented Ms. Spencer's desire to

> embrace different musical instruments from different cultures, as well as musical styles, in unusual combinations. So that I'm not just taking from the cultures that I've been studying, but trying to create something that is a

> show of gratitude and appreciation and respect for all the other cultures [1].

Seeing the marimba used in this format, both solo and ensemble, was, for me, an intriguing contrast to the more traditional contemporary setting in which the marimba was generally used. When I asked her about this in a 1998 interview she talked at some length about the state of American solo marimba playing and why she felt that her music was different than most of the current percussion literature, and as a result not taken as seriously.

> There seems to be a desire among percussionists to have their art and instrument 'validated' and taken seriously, like a string quartet would be taken seriously. Because of that the tendency has been to exclude music that has obvious jazz influences in harmonies and rhythms, from solo and chamber works, much to the dismay of many percussionists who play those styles of music in other settings. A lot of people who are very interested in playing what they deem as 'serious' classical music, or 'Western' music, have less of an interest in playing my pieces. People who do have an interest in world music or jazz (usually as drummers or improvisers) tend to feel it would be nice to have more of a variety of things to choose from to play that have jazz harmonies and rhythms [3].

By this time and with very few exceptions, Ms. Spencer was not playing any of her published solos without including some improvisation [3]. The forms these pieces took in live performance were often much like a traditional jazz form where there is some composed material that returns with some kind of variation, and with improvisation based

on thematic material and/or harmonic progressions, though not with a use of "strict jazz harmonic rhythm" [3]. Ms. Spencer related to me that she was realizing that writing semi-improvisatory pieces "takes me out of the mainstream of marimba players who want to look at my newest score" [3]. Yet she held to her strong views regarding improvisation, adding that she did not mind if this aspect of her music, which for her had become a central part, was something that could preset who was going to play it, though she expressed a hope "that people would want to learn to improvise, and that my music would encourage, if not force, people to have the confidence to try" [3].

This dilemma too raises the broader issue of categorization, resulting from Julie Spencer's attempts to fuse jazz mallets with serious marimba literature. Musical parallels certainly exist outside the percussion world of course, in the careers of other artists performing in the dual genres of classical and jazz, including the clarinetist Richard Stoltzman, trumpeter Wynton Marsalis, and the pianist Keith Jarrett, though Ms. Spencer's improvisation occurs in less traditional jazz formats. Her husband, Gernot Blume, notes that "improvisation is not just categorized as playing be-bop runs over chord changes either", adding that it is Julie's "in between-ness" that makes her music

> different, but that also makes it run up against those categories. You open any of those magazines, 'Percussive Notes' or whatever, and you're dealing with either mallet literature: the legit stuff, or you're dealing with jazz vibists, and there are no ideas on how to integrate improvisation into something holistic [3].

Further clouding these issues is the fact that unlike the instruments that Jarrett, Marsalis, and Stoltzman play, the marimba does not have the long tradition in the concert

hall, nor the body of literature and audience acceptance of these instruments. The comparison of performers functioning in dual musical worlds is fair, I believe, particularly in light of two important performances for Ms. Spencer in 1994. In February of 1994 Ms. Spencer was invited by noted film composer and conductor Lalo Schifrin to appear as guest soloist with the Glendale Symphony in Los Angeles, California. Schifrin's original intent was to have Ms. Spencer play some of her original music for orchestra, but because her appearance turned out to be scheduled as part of a Valentine's Day concert and the theme of the evening was considerably more conservative, instead of her own new music she was asked to arrange classical orchestra pieces as marimba concertos. Her program included portions of Albeniz's work *Iberia* arranged as a marimba concerto, and Liszt's *Hungarian Rhapsody #2* as a concerto with a cadenza that she composed [5]. There are several interesting facets to this performance: it marks one of the few times Ms. Spencer has appeared as a soloist and performed music that was not her own, and in spite of this appearance with the Glendale Symphony she has never actively pursued any other appearances of this nature [5].

Ms. Spencer has gained a certain undue notoriety for only a few of her pieces, primarily *Cat Clock* and *Tribeca Sunflower*, and that, coupled with her longstanding commitment to both world music and improvisation, has not been taken as seriously by the percussion world, than would a marimbist who had followed a career path with a more traditional Western art music approach, and in particular a marimbist who almost exclusively plays her own music.

The other important performance of 1994 that I referred to was Ms. Spencer's November, 1994 invitation to perform at the Percussive Arts Society's International

Convention, in Atlanta, Georgia. One could see this fusing of styles coming full-circle, as at this convention, unlike the solo performances of 1985, 1986, and 1991, she was featured with her ensemble "Common Ground". A quartet that still occasionally performs together (at the time of this writing), "Common Ground" featured Ms. Spencer playing marimba, vibes, tabla drums, Balinese gamelan instruments, electronic keyboards and hand percussion, along with her husband on piano and sitar, Ruben Alvarez on drum set , and Craig Williams on congas and hand percussion. Whereas the 1991 performance consisted of solo marimba contrasted with one ensemble piece, this 1994 concert featured the ensemble and saw only one solo marimba piece performed, the premiere of her ambitious seventeen minute work for marimba entitled *Elim*. As if to remind those in attendance that Julie Spencer as solo marimbist still existed, *Elim* was enthusiastically received by the audience, eliciting a standing ovation, in the middle of Common Ground's program.

Commissioned by noted Los Angeles studio percussionist Emil Richards, *Elim* highlights several non-musical factors that have influenced Julie Spencer as a musician, composer, and person. "Elim" is both an anagram for "Emil" and a mythical place from the bible. Many of Ms. Spencer's titles are "a play on words" [3] and by contrast, she has never opted for generic, non-descriptive titles, such as "etude", "rondo", etc. "I like to work with contrasts and interchangeable words, and my poetry is very often a play on words, all the different meanings of a word, and how that changes the meaning of the words that come before and after" [3]. Ms. Spencer has been writing poetry since early childhood, at least as long as she has been writing music, often entering both poetry and art contests and receiving art scholarships and awards. "Everything is together, whether

it's writing music, doing a drawing, or writing a poem" [3]. *Cat Clock I* is actually for spoken verse, and *Cat Clock II* is the ensuing marimba solo. As a result, many pieces for her are a synthesis of music and literature. "Very programmatically, my pieces are stories," she says [1], so that

> to name a piece…has always been as important to me as the name of a poem. A piece is never just a piece: a piece is either a poem, or it's a painting, or it's a story, or a thought, or a snapshot of an experience, trying to, the way an artist tries to paint something that they see, with representational art. The pieces have always been representational of something, having to do with one or more of the senses, so that the names of the pieces have always been *extremely* meaningful and very important to me…I approach the name the way I would approach a poem: every part of it has to be very specific [3].

And following that statement, one cannot examine her oeuvre without also examining the importance religion has played throughout Ms. Spencer's life.

Julie Spencer, born in Indianapolis, Indiana in 1962, grew up in a household both artistically and religiously diverse. Her father, Frank Spencer, an attorney by profession, also played euphonium and directed a church choir. Ms. Spencer's mother Arlene, a writer and teacher, helped to instill her love of poetry, often encouraging her to try and publish some of it [12]. The males in Frank Spencer's family had a long tradition of producing Greek and Latin professors, ministers, lawyers, doctors, or professors of philosophy. Ms. Spencer's great grandfather was a Methodist missionary in the Dakotas, her grandfather was a college president, professor of classic languages and a Baptist

minister, and her uncle was a philosophy professor who fueled Ms. Spencer's youthful curiosity of world religions [3]. Through her sisters and mother she was exposed to elements of Judaism, Islam, Catholicism, Disciples of Christ, and Jehovah's Witnesses.

Given Julie Spencer's previous statements with regards to the titles of her pieces, the musical/spiritual connections are demonstrated in such works as *Gomer in the Desert* (1991), the aforementioned *Elim* (1993) for solo marimba, and *Grateful Metamorphosis* (1990) for percussion ensemble. *Gomer in the Desert* derives its title from the Old Testament Book of Hosea in which Gomer, the wife of the prophet Hosea, is metaphorically led into the desert by God to learn the value of all that she had in her life, by not having them anymore. For Ms. Spencer it is a story "that talks about if someone could learn gratitude and could learn appreciation, that it would change their character." It is a metaphor for finding God, the metaphor being that if one could be "removed from everything that is distracting it would be easier to see a clearer way to God" [3].

I first personally studied marimba with Julie Spencer in the winter of 1992, after seeing her previously mentioned performance at the 1991 Percussive Arts Society Convention. Having a recital coming up later that winter, I was curious to know how Ms. Spencer dealt with pre-performance anxiety, and asked her how she warmed up backstage prior to an important performance. The first thing she told me was that she prayed. I clearly remember being taken aback at this answer, and I now realize that what she meant was not that she prayed in a manner like: "Oh please God, let me play the right notes", but that she prayed to God in gratitude for using her as a vehicle, or vessel, for God to communicate music to other people. Then she told me that she sang and clapped

her hands, to get her circulation and adrenalin going. Only later did she mention anything specific to the marimba.

Though not a marimba solo, and beyond the scope of this document, Julie Spencer's *Grateful Metamorphosis* for percussion ensemble is an important work because it sheds further light on her as a person, composer, and performer. Like *Elim* and *Gomer in the Desert*, its title expresses Ms. Spencer's ideas of faith and of becoming "a more grateful person on a spiritual level, and how that changed my degree of optimism and day to day enjoyment of living" [3]. Ms. Spencer feels that gratitude was not only a catalyst for an "inner metamorphosis for me to be a happier person", but "the only agent in the world that truly changes human hearts" [3]. Strongly influencing this work is Ms. Spencer's

> constant search for a better understanding of how to live what I believe to be is a very simple faith and that is that God exists, God is love, and that we are loved, and that if we are grateful human beings it will change our lives: that the response of gratitude to the acknowledgement of an existence of God into an understanding of that existence being, in nature, loving. That gratitude changes a person from the inside out and that's the only thing that does, more so than simply trying to be 'moral or 'good'.

Like *Grateful Metamorphosis*, another important non-marimba composition of Ms. Spencer's, and a further reflection of her spiritual and musical ideals, is 1994's *Soulhouse* for percussion quintet. This multi-movement hour-long work was written after she received a National Endowment for the Arts Jazz Composition Grant.

"Finally we are grateful to God, the ultimate improviser and composer, for changes inside.", ends the liner notes to (Blume/Spencer) Ms. Spencer and her husband Gernot Blume's 1995 CD titled "Changes Inside". This recording features the two of them in a jazz duo format playing their own compositions, and not only does the title hint at spiritual changes inside, but reflects both the geographical change of Ms. Spencer and her husband's move to Ann Arbor, Michigan, and Ms. Spencer's increasing focus on jazz improvisation. While her husband pursued doctoral studies in ethnomusicology at the University of Michigan, Ms. Spencer was engaged to teach marimba as a visiting lecturer.

For Ms. Spencer, well-known in the percussion arena as a marimba specialist, to release a recording of her jazz vibraphone playing, was unprecedented among well-known marimba artists, and consequently may not have been taken as seriously by those who were not aware of her eclectic musical background and long standing interest in improvisation.

This recording is, in terms of its instrumentation, similar to the duet albums of pianist Chick Corea and vibraphonist Gary Burton, and Ms. Spencer has long cited Chick Corea as an important influence. Her composition *White Squirrel* for example, owes its harmonic content largely to Ms. Spencer's transcriptions of Corea's *Children's Suites*. "It was my introduction to the octatonic scale," and "part of the jazz influence for me, because of *where* I came into contact with those kinds of sonorities" [3]. But given Gernot Blume's earlier statements regarding the fusing of "legit" marimba with improvisation, I was curious to know the reasons behind Ms. Spencer's decision to use the vibraphone on this project. As it turns out, the reasons were partly pragmatic, as both

the piano and vibraphone are closer in volume, and both have sustaining capabilities, unlike the marimba, and the music that was chosen for the recording was also written with vibes in mind. Ms. Spencer was also interested in exploring the four mallet techniques she uses on marimba on the vibraphone [5].

Further confirmation of Julie Spencer as improviser and composer is found in a three-volume collection, published in 1997, 1998, and 2000, of both hers and Gernot Blume's own jazz compositions. In *The Unbook* volumes "Red", "Blue", and "Green", six hundred of Julie Spencer and Gernot Blume's compositions are featured in a "lead sheet" style format, similar to other so-called "fake books" with which jazz musicians are familiar. Contained in the three volumes of *The Unbook* are "head-style" arrangements of original compositions, extractions of the *Soulhouse* percussion quintet, and lead sheets for nearly all of Ms. Spencer's marimba solos. It is interesting to compare visually, the printed music for both the lead sheet and solo marimba part to a particular piece, such as *Chelsea Window* or *Pink Elisa Spring*, for example.

In March of 1998 Julie Spencer and Gernot Blume were the featured guest composers and performers at the Composers Forum of the University of North Texas' "All the Arts" festival. Like the "Changes Inside" recording, this concert featured the two of them in a duo setting, but performing improvisations with titles of some of their favorite visual artists, including Kandinsky, Monet, and Chagall. For this concert she was again playing the marimba and African mbira, rather than the vibraphone featured on the "Changes Inside" recording. What is interesting to note about this event is that Ms. Spencer was asked to perform on the invitation of a composer's organization that promotes "new music" rather than a percussive organization, and offers a validation of

sorts, of Julie Spencer as composer, rather than marimbist. In fact, during the intervening years between this 1998 performance and her trip in 2001 to France, Julie Spencer's career focus as a composer has begun to equal her efforts as a marimba soloist and improviser. This seems to be how many in the percussion world are starting to view her, as a number of percussionists have begun to commission compositions from her.

Ms. Spencer has recently received commissions for a number of works, including *Tranquility* (1998) for solo vibraphone, *Tree Song* (2000) for marimba and flute, *The Emperor's New Clothes* (2000) for solo marimba, *At the Water's Edge* (2001) for the Wisconsin Youth Symphony percussion ensemble, and *White Whales* (2002) for the Japanese marimba and trombone duo of Shiori and Hiroshi Tanaka. Upcoming commissions include pieces for orchestra, wind symphony, a Japanese percussion ensemble, and gamelan ensemble.

Julie Spencer continues to remain active as a marimba soloist and clinician, with recent residencies in the states of Washington and Indiana, and an upcoming performance in Tokyo, Japan in the fall of 2003. Active also as a freelance jazz musician, and with a body of compositions now also including several orchestra pieces, a twenty-five minute solo piano piece, two choral pieces (one a commission for the Oregon Repertory Singers) and four art songs with German texts based on Gernot's poetry, Ms. Spencer does seem to be fulfilling equally the career prophecy of marimba soloist, improviser, and composer.

Chapter 2: Techniques

In my 1998 interviews with Julie Spencer, I asked her how important a knowledge of her technique was in performing her marimba solos, and she answered that she gets many phone calls regarding stickings and other performance practices related to her compositions. She also added that she felt her printed music "scares off a lot of people" [3]. What she is alluding to by that statement are the numerous instances, at conventions and workshops, which afford artists like Ms. Spencer the opportunity to sell their music and recordings. On many occasions, upon browsing through her music, someone will inevitably approach her asking how a particular passage in one of her solos is played. "When I give a brief explanation, well, it (the music) usually goes back on the shelf" [3].

Another larger issue that she is alluding to is the degree of difficulty inherent in most of her pieces. "I know that my music tends to be at the upper end of difficulty almost always, and that seems to be quite a discouraging factor for a lot of players to get into it" [3] Ms. Spencer admits that she often does not realize how difficult much of her writing is, because she feels that "the techniques that I use make a lot of very difficult things very easy" [3]. "It's not only a given difficulty level inherent in the piece" Gernot Blume notes, but that if one were to perform her music without using her techniques, based on relaxation and fluidity, "even if you play the notes, it doesn't sound quite right" [3]. There is an element to Ms. Spencer's music that transcends the printed page, much in the same way that the subtle nuances of style, phrasing, and tone in a transcribed jazz solo, or an Afro-Cuban percussion performance cannot be completely captured via written notation. Of the times that I have seen her perform, I was always struck by the warm, non-percussive, almost cello-like sound that she achieves when playing the

marimba. This is not so much due to mallet choice (softer mallets), but is more the resulting effect of her relaxed movements generating the kind of stroke that at times has a more glancing contact with the marimba bar, rather than a directly perpendicular angle.

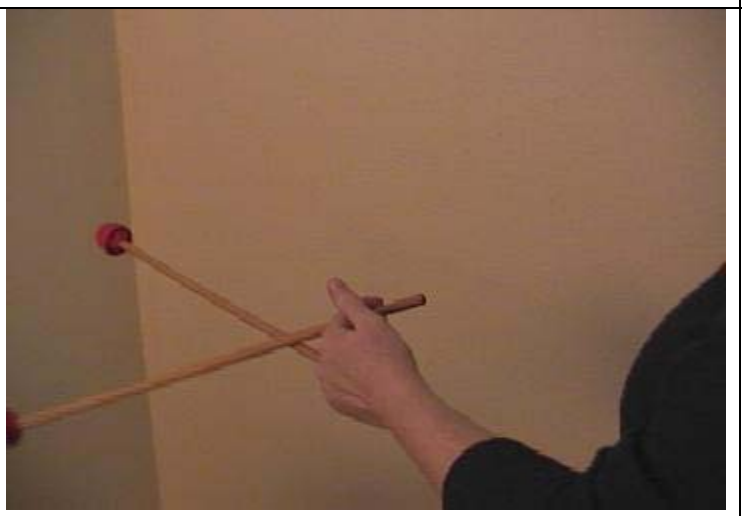
Ms. Spencer's approach to marimba performance is what I would call a completely holistic one. In private lessons and master classes she discusses not only playing the marimba, but also focuses on other performance related aspects such as relaxation, memorization, and practice techniques. Her clinics, performances, and master classes, which she has given at universities in the United States, Canada, France, and Germany, are applicable not only to marimbists, but to non-percussionists as well. Both of the master classes that I have witnessed, in 1994 and 1999, were almost entirely devoted to the broader musical issues of practice habits and memorization, rather than marimba technique specifically. During the question and answer period of her 1991 Percussive Arts Society Convention appearance, I was impressed by her common sense and relaxed approach to answering very specific technique questions. When one member of the audience asked how he could attain a smooth and even independent roll in his left hand, as he had already achieved with his right, Ms. Spencer responded that his right hand needed to teach his left hand. She then proceeded, in a manner suggesting a patient mother explaining a concept to her young child, to verbalize for the audience her internal dialogue of right hand teaching left.

On one occasion, during the course of my study with her, when the topic of the Barry Green book *The Inner Game of Music*, and its mental techniques came up, she mentioned that she preferred the book that inspired it, Timothy Gallwey's *The Inner Game of Tennis*, because it was more metaphorical, leaving more room for creativity in

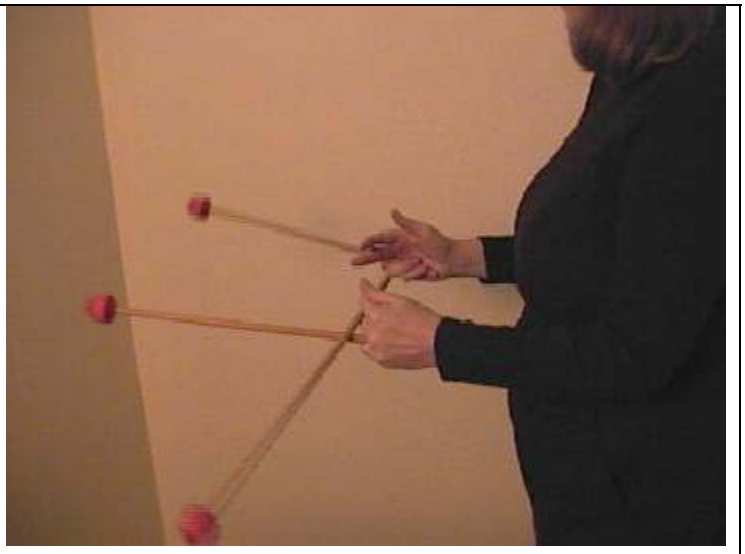
interpreting its practical applications [5]. Many of my lessons with her were spent helping me to become more relaxed and comfortable with my own body, as much as with the marimba itself. To this end, this chapter begins with some of Ms. Spencer's methodology concerning warm-ups and exercises done away from the instrument.

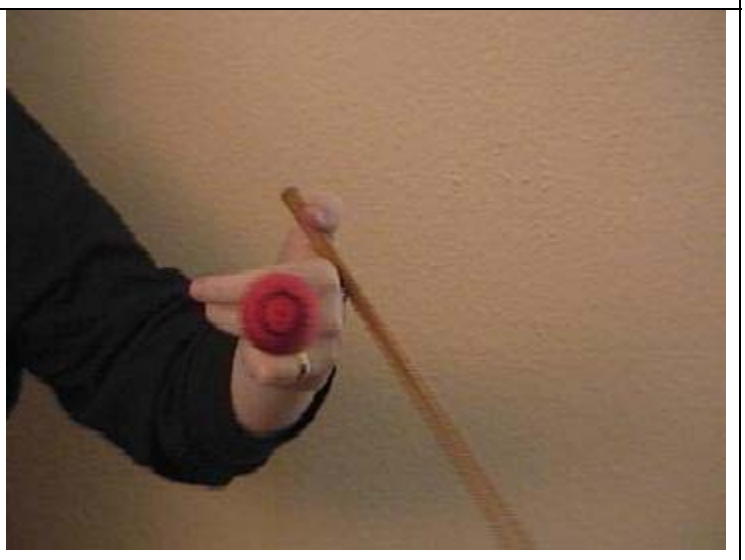
Julie Spencer, in the following video examples, demonstrates a number of exercises that she employs in her playing and teaching, each designed to strengthen various muscles of the hands. She calls these "mallet games", and this more playful terminology, as opposed to something that connotes pain and effort, reflects her relaxed and natural approach to marimba. I like to think of these as more related to yoga and flexibility, rather than the strength building of, say, weightlifting.

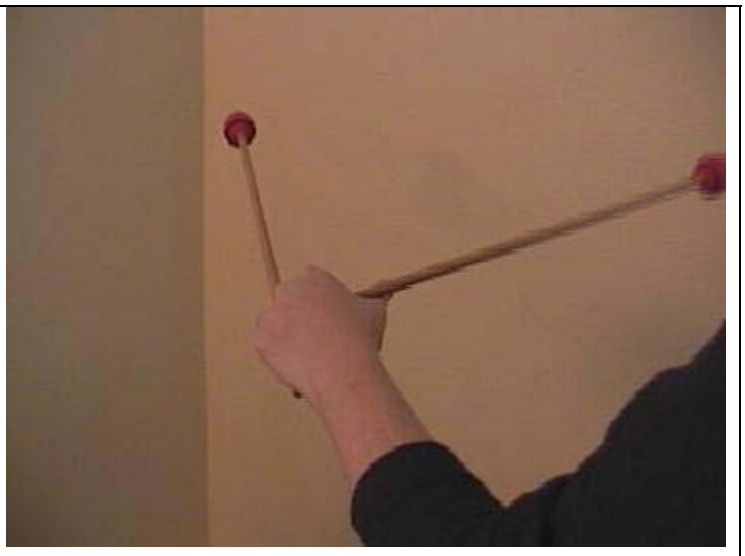
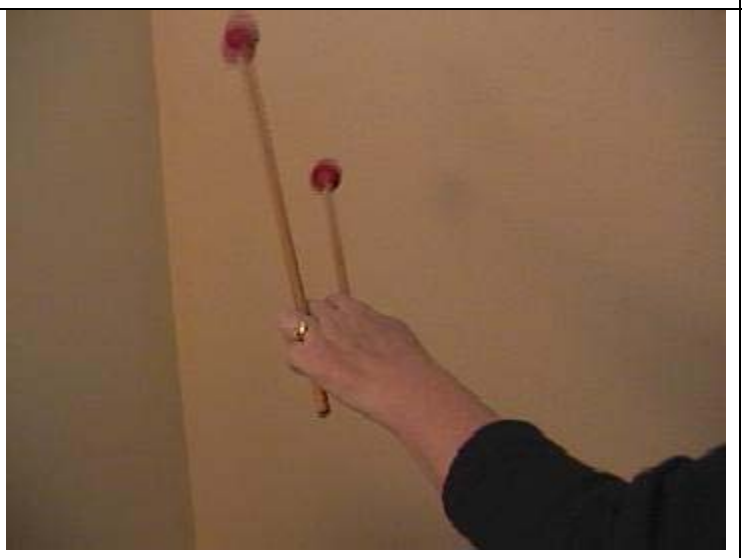
Scissor Kicks In this exercise the inside mallet of either hand is held between the index and middle finger (like a pair of scissors) and pulled upwards in a 45 degree arc by the index finger, to a position parallel to the outside mallet. While viewing image 2.1 notice that the outside mallet remains nearly motionless and there is no movement of the forearm.	 Image 2.1

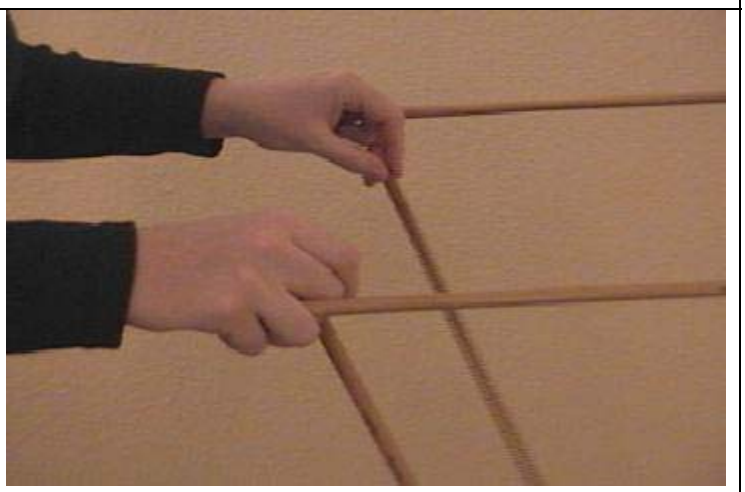
Scissor-ups Like the “Scissor Kick”, the inside mallet moves, yet this exercise engages the thumb, to “lock in” the mallet at a fully vertical position, so that the path of the mallet constitutes a full 180 degree arc, perpendicular to the floor. While viewing image 2.2 notice again that the outside mallet remains nearly motionless, and that the mallet is held briefly in the upright position.	 Image 2.2
Cross Kicks Like the previous “scissors” exercises, the Cross Kick involves only the index and middle finger to move the inside mallet. Here the inside mallet is tossed over the outside mallet, which still	 Image 2.3

remains basically motionless. While viewing image 2.3 note that the tossing motion is achieved only with the index and middle fingers, and that the hand does not turn over.	

Image 2.4 shows both the right and left hands performing the Cross Kicks simultaneously. Notice here that the forearms do not aid in the movement of the inside mallets.	 Image 2.4

Controlled Cross This exercise differs from the Cross Kick in that the inside mallet is moved with a controlled pivot between the thumb, index, and middle fingers, rather than with a tossing motion. Notice in image 2.5 that the inside mallet travels in a smooth 180 degree arc parallel to the floor, and that again, the hand and forearm do not move.	 Image 2.5
Thumb Ups In this exercise, with the inside mallet starting on the outside of the hand (as pictured), the thumb is used to pull the mallet to an upright position perpendicular to the floor, and is held briefly, before gravity returns the mallet to parallel with the floor.	 Image 2.6

Thumb Over In this exercise the inside mallet starts from the position pictured at the right. The thumb "pushes" the inside mallet up and "over" the outside mallet, in a 180 degree arc, perpendicular to the floor. The thumb motion here is one of "pushing up", rather than "pulling down", as in the previous Thumb Up example.	 Image 2.7
Pinkie Ups This exercise concentrates on the three fingers: middle, ring, and pinkie, that hold the outside mallet. These three fingers and the outside mallet are pushed up from normal playing position, extended briefly, and then returned to playing position. Notice in the	 Image 2.8

video example that the upward movement comes only from these three fingers, and that the wrist is not involved.	
<u>Pinkie Pull</u> This exercise involves only the pinkie, which pulls the outside mallet downwards in a "chopping" fashion. Notice in the video example that only one mallet is being used, and as with the Pinkie Up exercise, there is no break, or movement, of the wrist and forearm.	 Image 2.9
<u>Stirs</u> Here the inside mallets of both hands are moved in a circular pattern using only the tips of the thumbs and index fingers.	 Image 2.10

Several of Ms. Spencer's exercises involve relaxed movement of one's whole body in concert with the hands, which at first, can feel quite awkward.

Stirs with Body Movement In this mallet game, her "stirs" are done with both hands at the same time as in image 2.10 above, while gently rocking side to side.	 Image 2.11

Waterfalls Here the mallets are held loosely in the hands, with the hands facing up, and dragged up and down the ends of the instrument. It is important to note several things: that the trailing mallets (left hand on the way up, and right hand on the way down) are behind the	 Image 2.12

hand and not in front, as in playing position, and that Ms. Spencer looks up (or down) at the end of the instrument as she is moving. Notice as well that Ms. Spencer moves in a very relaxed and deliberate manner.	
<u>Crossing Hand Waterfalls</u> Here the mallets of each hand are dragged across the bars in contrary motion to one another.	 Image 2.13

At the heart of Julie Spencer's playing technique is the fundamental principle of relaxation, and that a relaxed muscle is easier to control than a tense muscle. When Ms. Spencer plays, she says she is "trying to be as relaxed as I can…so that I'm using only enough tension in my hands to keep the mallets from falling out. I try to let the mallets do the work by allowing them to do what they can naturally do" [1]. Much of this overall philosophy was born out of necessity, as Ms. Spencer began experiencing muscle

soreness and back pain from both long practice hours and heavy equipment lifting. One back injury in particular limited her to practicing only with very minimal arm movement, which then led Ms. Spencer to a closer examination of just what *was* necessary movement, "and contributed to my conclusion that less energy expenditure was needed to play the marimba" [5]. This directly resulted in her decision to pursue the most relaxed grip, basic stroke motion, and choreography possible [5]. Combined with these realizations, Ms. Spencer's idea for and subsequent work on the one-mallet roll became "the kernel of everything, because to get relaxed enough to do *that* was what allowed me to do everything else with four mallets" [5]. Ultimately then, it is the degree of relaxation required to perform the one-mallet roll that, for Ms. Spencer, is transferable to her four-mallet technique. Does she then recommend that marimba students learn her two-mallet technique as a prerequisite for four-mallet study? "No", she says, "because with four mallets it is about arm movement and using larger muscle groups, whereas the two mallet techniques involve movement only from relaxed wrists and fingers" [5].

Image 2.14 demonstrates the one-mallet roll, performed slow to fast, on one note. Notice that Ms. Spencer's hand is "choked up" on the mallet, with the thumb facing up, and that her wrist is turned parallel to the marimba. As mentioned in the above paragraph, all movement is indeed from the wrist and fingers.

Image 2.14

Image 2.14 shows the one-mallet roll performed on a single pitch. When the roll is to be performed on two different pitches however, as in the following musical example (Figure 2.1) from her solo *Cat Clock,* she does not turn her wrist parallel to the instrument.

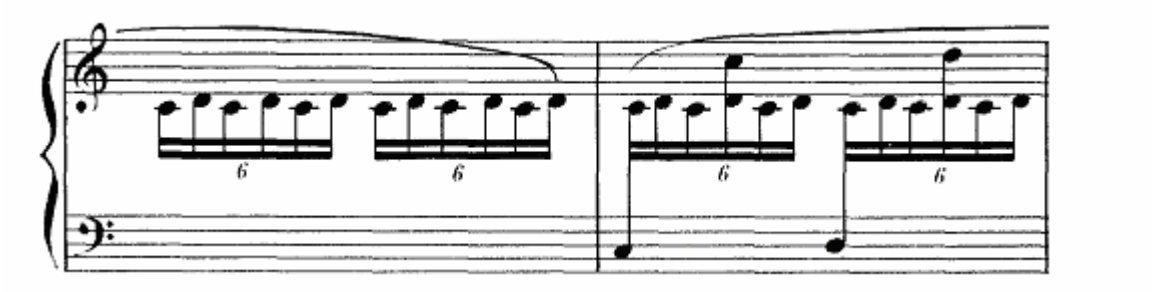


Fig.2.1 *Cat Clock*, mm. 78-79

Ms. Spencer's initial article dealing with this technique, in *Percussive Notes* magazine, Fall 1987, describes the one-mallet roll as "being useful in one-mallet arpeggios, fast large interval jumps, and octave grace notes" [8].

Ms. Spencer's other two-mallet technique, previously described in chapter one as being akin to the movement of a windshield wiper, is demonstrated in Image 2.15. It is

important to note that the shaft of the mallet is held out in the farther in the hand, nearly perpendicular to the body.

Image 2.15

Image 2.16 shows the same technique from a slightly different perspective.

Image 2.16

This motion is utilized by Ms. Spencer not only for large interval leaps such as in *Cat Clock* and the end of the first movement of Paul Creston's *Concertino for Marimba and Orchestra* (measures 177-180), but when also playing a line of consecutive notes, as

in a melody or scale, by alternating between the palm-up and palm-down positions for every note. This ultimately helps her to achieve a more legato sound, by changing the path of the mallet head from straight up and down, to a path more curvilinear. I do not mean to suggest here that Ms. Spencer's method should supplant conventional approaches to two-mallet legato playing, such as the excellent approach described in Gary Cook's text *Teaching Percussion*, for example. But I do feel however, that this approach to two-mallet technique can be an another important tool in the percussionist's arsenal.

This, combined with the one-mallet roll, was initially referred to by Ms. Spencer as her "Horizontal Concept" of marimba technique, though she now prefers the collective term "Spencer Technique" to encompass both her two and four mallet techniques. The fundamental idea is to play with horizontal motion using the pronator and supernator muscles, rather than the standard vertical, or down-up motion involving the flexor and extensor muscles. She asserts that this style of playing

> conserves energy. The motion of the mallet coming off the bar leads directly to the next note, whereas vertical playing, no matter how close to the keyboard you keep your mallets, requires unnecessary motion. Instead of the mallet moving up, over, and down to get from note to note, it flows immediately to each one with a relaxed movement. Because this motion conserves energy, you are able to minimize tension at higher speeds, and so play at even faster rates with no discomfort [8].

It is important to mention here that Ms. Spencer is a firm believer in quality rattan shafts, [3] as opposed to birch dowels or any other inflexible shaft that does not take

advantage of the natural torque of the movement. Additionally, when performing both movements of the horizontal concept, a flexible shaft allows the mallet to be "carried largely by its own momentum" [8]. With regards to four-mallet playing, rattan shafts greatly lessen the impact of attack through the hands and forearms. She does not feel, as many marimba players do, that the natural flexion of a rattan shaft decreases her note accuracy [3]. I would posit that by "quality" rattan shafts she means ones with a fairly thick diameter, and capable of remaining nearly straight over time.

Both of these two-mallet techniques form the technical basis of her early marimba solo *Cat Clock*, which became a mainstay in her repertoire for clinic and concert appearances throughout the mid and late 1980's. Often times though, Ms. Spencer was finding that, to the exclusion of more holistic musical issues, her clinic audiences wanted to focus only on the horizontal technique itself, which was, and still is, only a small part of the ideas she wanted to communicate. By 1986, she had come to the conclusion that "music is not merely sound. If that's true, things like accuracy and technique, which are often emphasized by teachers and performers, have very little to do with making music. Music is a vehicle for something else" [11]. By 1987 she was admitting that "people want to talk about the technique so much -and I suppose that's natural- but for me, that's just not where it's at" [12]. To interviewer Patrick Wilson she related the experience of having taught a two-week summer workshop in St. Suave, France, and

> on the last day, one of the students finally said 'Julie, you know, we've never even talked about how you hold your sticks.' So I spent maybe five minutes in two weeks on how I hold my sticks. The rest of the time people were singing and doing improvisational dance as we played, and

> doing breathing exercises and group improvisation with 'found' instruments. It's a good feeling in a group when people are relaxed and creative, because it makes the music personal. I hope that's what people would remember after working with me, rather than how I hold my sticks, because what matters is expressing thoughts and feelings [12].

In spite of this degree of notoriety, Ms. Spencer's success with the one-mallet roll and what it taught her regarding relaxation, inspired her to learn more about other relaxation techniques including the "Alexander Technique", and hatha yoga. "There were years at the beginning, when I was probably the most unmusical marimba player you ever heard because I was trying to play everything fast and loud" [12]. Ultimately the horizontal technique changed all that, because "to develop the one-mallet roll, I had to become a more relaxed player, and consequently a more relaxed person" [12]. In addition, several books, including the aforementioned *Inner Game of Tennis*, and *Zen and the Art of Archery*, have strongly influenced her technique, as did "a re-examination of biblical texts having to do with a 'prayerful state of mind.'" [4] When one sees Ms. Spencer perform, with her correct and upright posture, economy of motion, and warm, legato sound, it is easy to understand her assertion that these philosophies, so integrated into her playing, "have brought a lot of joy to my music" [4].

For Ms. Spencer, a relaxed method of playing not only encompasses the wrist and fingers, as in the techniques above, but also includes the forearms, upper arms, and back. Early on in my study with her, one of the first things she had me do at the marimba were several exercises she refers to as "flops" and "mallet tosses". When I view video footage of my marimba performances prior to my studies with Ms. Spencer, I can see

why she felt these exercises would benefit me. I had never felt relaxed at the instrument and was carrying a significant amount of tension in my neck, through the shoulders, and down into my arms and hands, and initially found these exercises difficult to perform correctly.

Flops In this exercise the four mallets are lifted up with a relaxed motion that originates from the elbows, and are allowed to "flop" down onto the lower manual. It is important to note that the mallet heads never go above the hands, and the entire motion starts with the mallets resting on the keyboard.	 Image 2.17

Flops are performed without regard to specific pitches, and as a result, there is no chance for mental tension, possibly arising from the desire to play correct notes, manifesting itself externally in the act of playing. At this point it is only important to feel what it is like to isolate and use the larger muscle groups of the upper arms. The point is only to practice "the choreography of the stroke, without engaging the muscles of the forearms and hands. The hand is floating freely at the end of the arm with no engagement" [6]. Ms. Spencer has her students perform several variations on this

exercise, one of which involves performing the flop without taking the mallet heads off the bars, further isolating only the arm above the elbow and not the lower arm. In another variation, the mallets are lifted high above the hands, the purpose here being to develop the point of differentiation at which you hold the mallets loose, and they fall out, versus tight, where they would not slide in your fingers [6].

The following exercise, demonstrated in Image 2.18, is referred to by Julie Spencer as a "mallet toss". Here the same large muscle group motions are done as in the flops, and specific pitches are now incorporated.

Mallet Toss The movement of the mallets here is identical to the "flops", yet now Ms. Spencer maintains the comfortable interval spread of a perfect fourth in both hands. These can be done with a perfect fifth in either hand as well, and can use both the upper or lower manual.	 Image 2.18

The overarching theme of all the exercises that have been presented to this point is to isolate motions and the involvement of specific muscle groups, from the smallest, as in the mallet games, to the largest, as in the flops and mallet tosses. The eventual goal is

for the marimbist to know what it feels like when a particular muscle is in use or is passive, and in performance have "the ability to choose the combination of movements and involvement of muscle groups, so one can decide whether or not to use them when playing a given passage of music" [6]. One has to know what it feels like when a muscle is in use and to identify tension so you are not employing more muscles than you need. This muscle/body awareness is similar to the techniques used in yoga and tai chi, and Ms. Spencer feels that these exercises are helpful for her students because "most of the time, as marimbists, we're using muscle groups developed out of habit and daily routine movements" [6]. By using these exercises to re-examine performance techniques, in effect "starting from scratch" [6] and consciously isolating, identifying, and feeling these muscle groups the body can only then have the options to unconsciously choose what to move. "It's about freedom of movement and freedom from habits. And the acquisition of increased freedom, whether philosophical, emotional, or physical, begins with simplification. One has to know what is before you can choose what will be" [6].

This process of building a technique from its simple form to advanced stages can be seen in the video examples that follow. A large component of Julie Spencer's technique, and one which allows her to achieve a more pianistic melody and accompaniment style in both her playing style and compositions for marimba, is based on the piano technique of note grouping, in which one large movement results in two or more notes. Here is an advanced exercise, based on the note grouping concept.

Image 2.19

In image 2.19 Ms. Spencer is demonstrating what she terms a “ruff”, based on her technique of a “three-point turn” [6] whereby three notes are played in quick succession by alternating the two mallets of either hand. In this example one vertical stroke (one lift of the arm) is combined with the three-point turn and a lateral movement of the shoulders and latisimus dorsii muscles, which move the mallets to the different notes on the keyboard. This whole three-note process begins with the exercise demonstrated in the following example, which Ms. Spencer terms the “accented triplet exercise”.

Image 2.20

Starting with both mallets on the bars, and any medium-sized interval, the movement originates by bending the elbow. The wrist is flexible and there is practically no movement of the fingers to hold the mallets. At this stage of the technique there is only one note for each vertical stroke and there is no lateral movement required. As this becomes comfortable the intervals between the mallets then get smaller, as in image 2.21.

Image 2.21

When the tempo of this technique is increased, and there is a pause between each three note group, occurring when the opposite hand plays, the three notes are now being played by only one vertical movement. This is what Ms. Spencer refers to as her "three-point turn" [6]. and is demonstrated in image 2.22.

Image 2.22

Here the three note group, phrased in triplets and played on a single note, is played with a slight accent on the first note. In the above example, Ms. Spencer starts each triplet on the inner two mallets using the mallet stickings of 3-4-3 and 2-1-2 (with the mallets numbered from left hand to right 1-2-3-4). Though not shown in Image 2.22 above, she proceeds to play the triplets with several other sticking variations. These include starting with the outer two mallets and using the stickings of 4-3-4 and 1-2-1, starting with the inner left and outer right and a sticking of 2-1-2 and 4-3-4, and finally the permutation of outer right and inner left mallets, for a sticking of 4-3-4 and 2-1-2.

The next level of complexity arises when the accents are taken out of each three-point turn and shorter vertical strokes are used, as in image 2.23.

Image 2.23

Notice in the above example that Ms. Spencer's elbows are away from her torso, so that the balance of the weight of the arm is completely different. Now the back muscles are being used to support the weight of the arm so that the arm muscles can stay relaxed in order to execute the three-point turn quickly. This is also made more difficult because of the shortened vertical stroke, as there is less recovery time between each of these rapid three-point turns. The aural effect is that of a tremolo or roll, and she used this technique to great effect when she performed Liszt's *Hungarian Dances* with the Glendale Symphony, enabling her to achieve "a thicker sounding roll" [5]. Notice as well that by turning sideways to the keyboard Ms. Spencer creates enough space on the bars for all four mallet heads. She moves the mallets to different notes on the keyboard by taking steps forward and backward, rather than engaging the shoulders and back muscles in any lateral movement at this point.

It is the lateral movement needed to move the mallets to different notes on the keyboard that is the only element missing from the above four examples, all of which lead systematically back to being able to execute the first exercise, the three note "ruffs",

in a relaxed and smooth manner. Again, it is a process of building from simple to complex, finding out what each muscle group feels like to move by itself in one particular kind of movement. Once the three-point turn is mastered, only then is a specific lateral movement added. The movement is a "specific" lateral movement in the sense that it can not be too fast or too slow, for if the movement is too slow, a note will repeat. If the movement is too fast, the three-point turn (ruff) will not be diatonic.

Ms. Spencer is focusing on the obvious but often overlooked phenomenon that when one incorporates the "lats" and shoulders to extend the arms outward in a lateral movement, subtle complexities arise because

> you are using some of the largest muscles you have, in the most subtle combination of rotation and extension, to compensate for the marimba bars getting shorter (and narrower) in the upper register and longer (wider) in the lower register. This is why lateral movements are so difficult: it's difficult to make large muscles do subtle movements [5].

Perhaps drawing on her piano background, she is quick to point out that this is something that "pianists do not contend with" [5].

Taking the ruffs one step further, Ms. Spencer also uses the same arm and hand movements and 3-4-3 mallet sticking to play arpeggiated triads in "broken" fashion (root, third, fifth: third, fifth, root: fifth, root, third: etc.,). In this exercise the third note of the three-point turn is made more difficult because the inside mallet of the right hand (the number three mallet) has to come underneath the hand to play the last note of each triad inversion.

It is important to mention that Ms. Spencer also performs the three-point turn, or ruffs, with the mallet sticking of 4-3-4, in addition to the 3-4-3 sticking demonstrated throughout the previous examples. Part of the reason for this is to better accommodate the upper manual keys, as shown in image 2.24.

Image 2.24

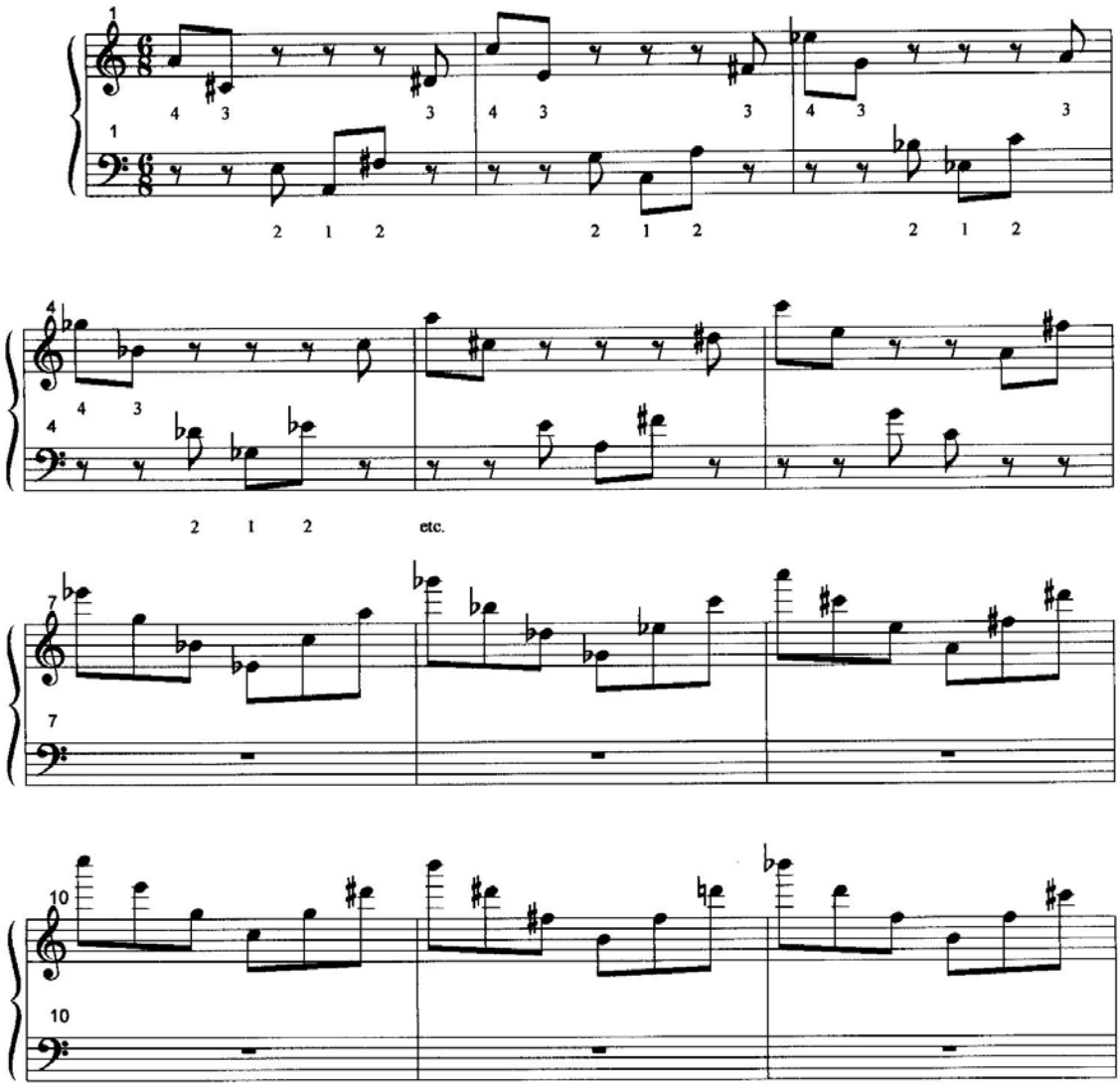
Here the three stroke ruffs are performed in the key of Eb Major, and in order to negotiate the varying combinations of white and black keys Ms. Spencer uses both the 3-4-3 and 4-3-4 stickings. For example, the three-note group comprised of the pitches *d, e-flat,* and *f* are easier played with the 4-3-4 combination, as are the pitches *g* to *a-flat* to *b-flat*.

After the rolls and ruffs, the next level of difficulty with regards to the three point turn is its use in combination with the one vertical movement, the lateral movements, as well as intervallic changes with the fingers incorporating both white and black keys of the keyboard. The following exercise, presented in image 2.25 below, combines the three-point turn with these other elements. It is important to note in this exercise, here performed from slow to fast, that Ms. Spencer begins with the mallet heads on the bars,

rather than holding the mallets above the bars, which would require unnecessary energy expenditure and possible hand tension.

Image 2.25

Figure 2.2 displays a transcription of the exercise seen in the video example above.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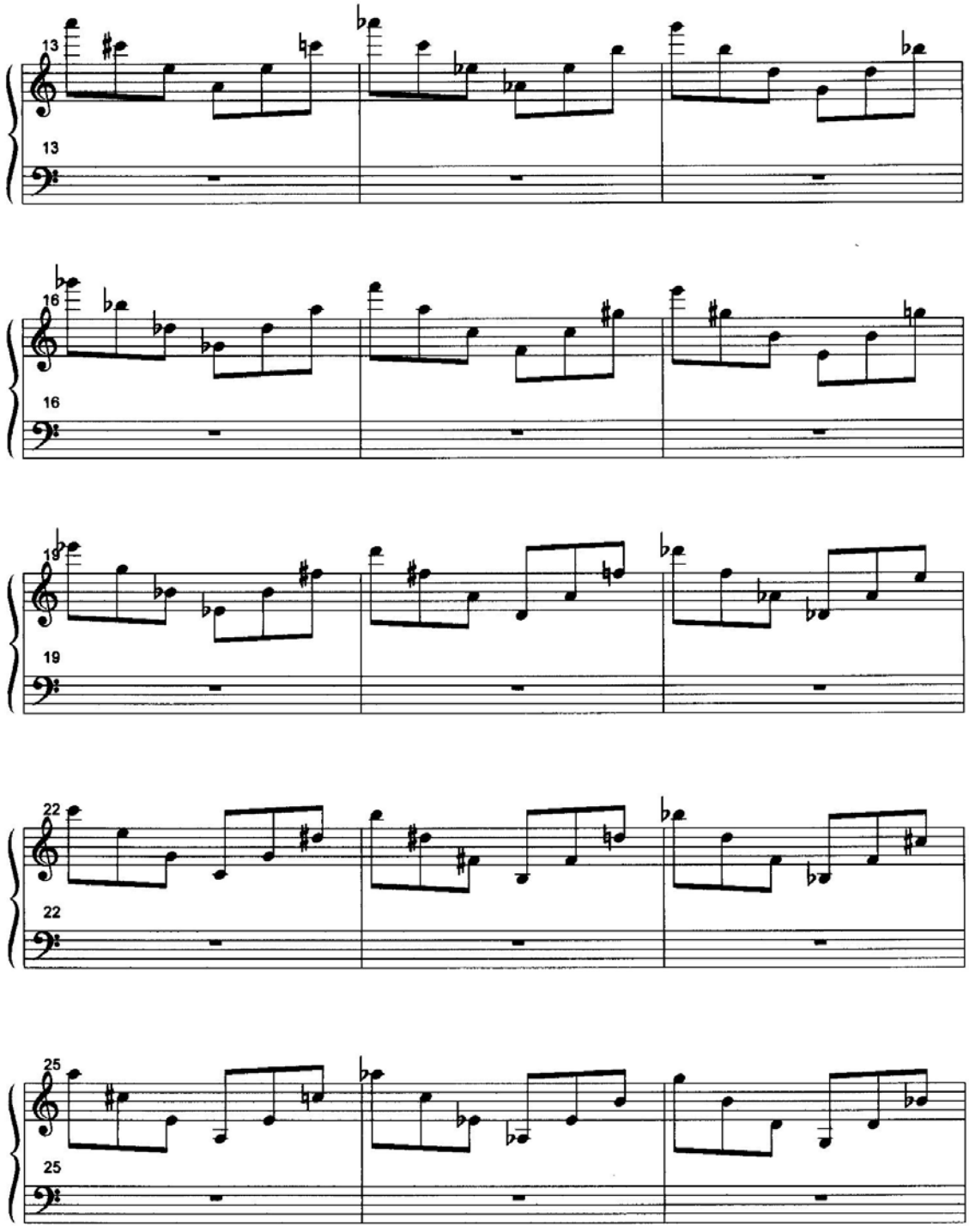
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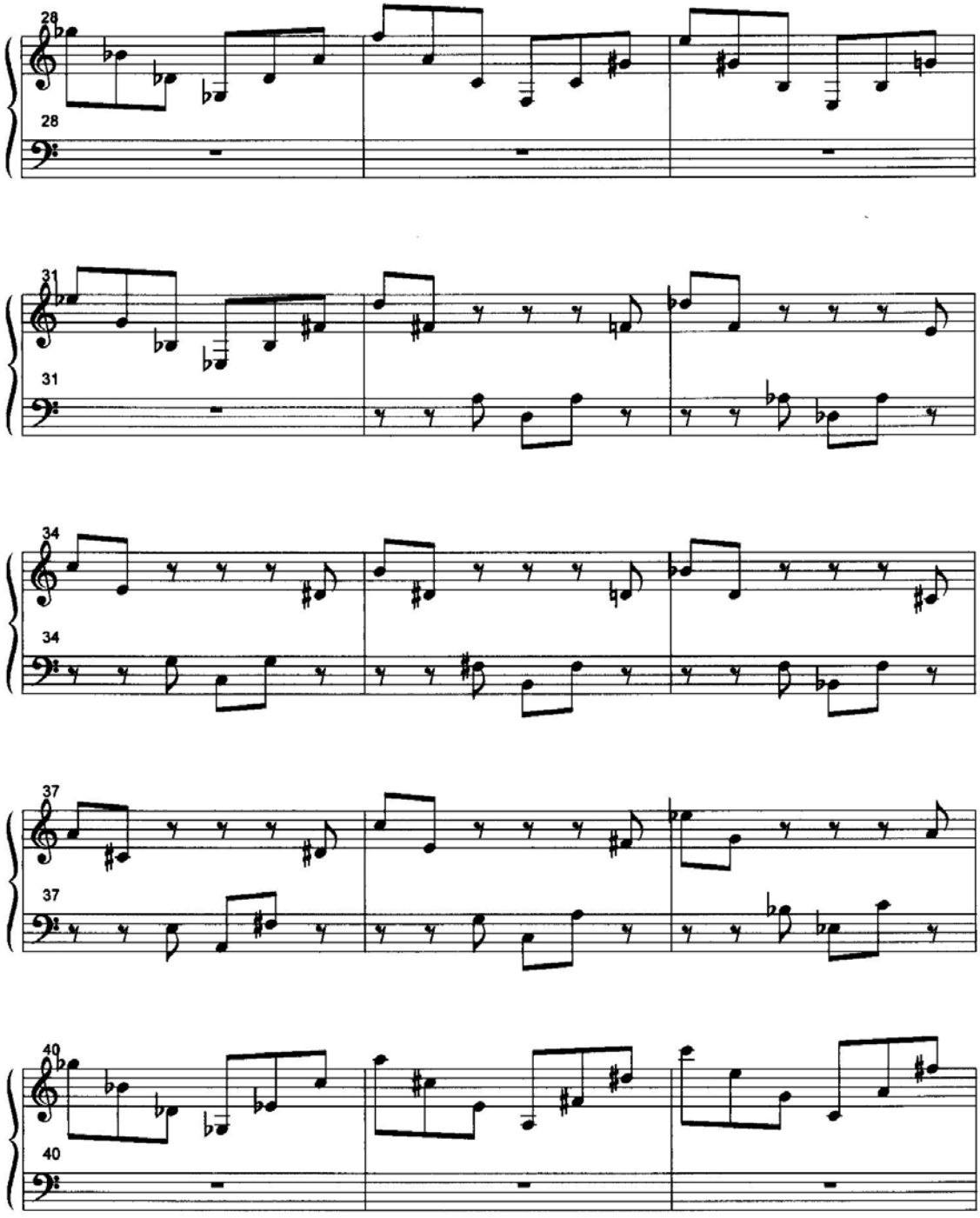
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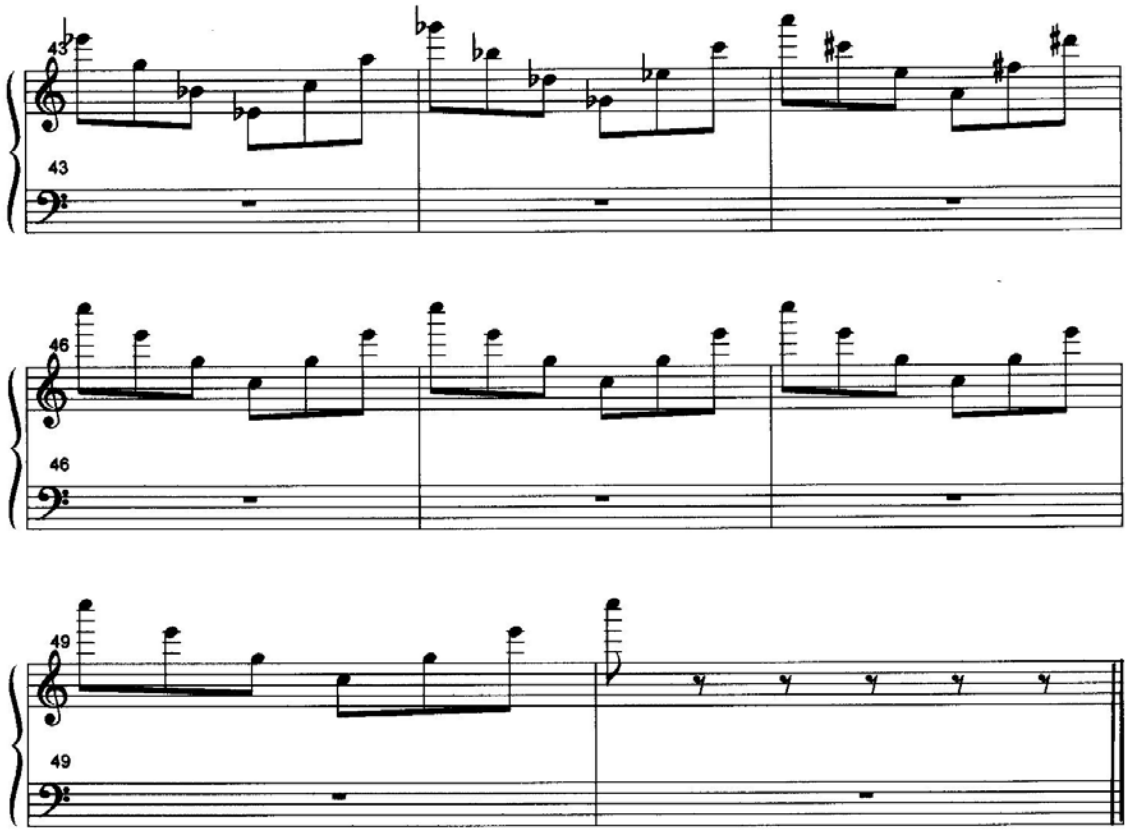


Fig. 2.2

It is the aim of reducing hand tension that causes Ms. Spencer to depart from conventional practices with regards to one critical aspect of her grip: specifically how she uses her thumbs when holding four mallets. Students of what is today generally referred to as "Musser" marimba grip, or its more refined version called "Stevens" grip are advised that "except for intervals larger than a tenth, the thumb is never placed between the shafts" [9]. In other words, a fulcrum is always maintained between the tips of the thumb and index finger which hold the two inside mallets. Here is a video example, image 2.26, of Ms. Spencer performing an exercise that demonstrates for her just where this point of contact, or fulcrum, is broken when performing consecutive double vertical strokes (both mallets of one hand striking simultaneously).

Image 2.26

With both mallets starting on the pitch “G4” she performs a series of expanding intervals on the lower manual of the keyboard. The inner mallet remains on the pitch “G4” and the outer mallet expands down to the pitch “C3”, achieving an interval of a twelfth. Image 2.27 shows the same technique demonstrated in the right hand.

Image 2.27

In an expanding intervallic passage such as this, Ms. Spencer’s thumb is placed between the shafts of the mallets much sooner than is common practice. By the time she

reaches an interval of a sixth in her left hand, and an octave in her right (comparably the same distance given the marimba's wider bars in the lower register versus the narrower bars in the upper range) she has moved her thumb inside the mallet shafts. To restate, the point of this break with traditional technique is that she is trying to play with "as much physical relaxation as possible and only use muscles and movements that are necessary" [6]. To relate my own experience, I was having trouble performing a series of long, extended passages of octave double vertical strokes found in Nebosja Zivkovic's marimba solo *Ilijas* without experiencing pain and discomfort in the base of my thumb and into the palm of my hand. By altering conventional technique, and breaking the fulcrum between the thumb and index finger and moving my thumb inside the shaft, this source of discomfort has been eliminated. And although this alteration is contrary to conventional marimba pedagogy (particularly Leigh Steven's text *Method of Movement for Marimba*), it is valuable because it is another means of reducing tension that may be experienced by some marimbists.

Just as demonstrated in the previous examples regarding the three-point turn and its increasing degrees of complexity, the next level of difficulty involving Ms. Spencer's approach to the thumb can be seen in image 2.28.

Image 2.28

This ability to quickly go from a small interval, with the thumb on the mallet shaft and maintaining a fulcrum with the index finger, to a large interval where the thumb is placed inside the shaft is one that Ms. Spencer exploits in a number of her compositions, particularly her chorale for marimba *Before the Beginning*. Here is the same technique demonstrated in a slightly different musical context. Notice in image 2.29 that the momentum of the mallets in going from a small interval to a large one is generated by the movement of the forearm and not just the fingers.

Image 2.29

This technique of placing the thumb inside the mallet shaft allows for some very large interval spreads in both the upper and lower registers of the instrument, as demonstrated in image 2.30.

Image 2.30

Here are two views, right and left hand, of the same technique, which Ms. Spencer has exploited in a number of her marimba compositions (Images 2.31 and 2.32).

Image 2.31	Image 2.32
	

Often when playing single note lines in one or both hands Ms. Spencer uses stickings such as those demonstrated in image 2.33.

Image 2.33

When she plays a single note line in this manner she says she "feels like she's swinging the wrists from side to side, rather than turning the wrists." She adds that she is "feeling the weight at the bottom of her hand" [3].

In a number of her solo marimba compositions that require a right hand melodic line to be played against a left hand accompaniment Ms. Spencer uses this alternating 3-4-3-4 sticking (referred to by marimbists as single alternating strokes). Conventional practice would be to use the inside right mallet (#3) almost exclusively, resulting in a stroke that is straight up and down, with the mallet head making direct contact with the marimba bar. Using this alternating sticking of 3-4-3-4 (or 4-3-4-3, etc.) results in a less direct contact being made between the mallet head and the marimba bar, as both of the mallets in the right hand produce a stroke that follows a curved trajectory. The end result is a less percussive, more legato tone, as was described with Ms. Spencer's two-mallet techniques. This is not meant to be an indictment of conventional legato techniques, but

rather serves to illustrate one of the factors that contribute to Ms. Spencer's overall sound production on the marimba, as is the following method of playing unaccompanied single note lines.

Image 2.34

In the above video example, image 2.34, Ms. Spencer is playing a quick succession of "double strokes": the two mallets of the left hand followed by the two right hand mallets. Key in performing this technique is the ability to maintain relaxed and flexible fingers and wrists. Image 2.35 shows the same technique, now incorporating upper manual keys and a combination of single and double strokes.

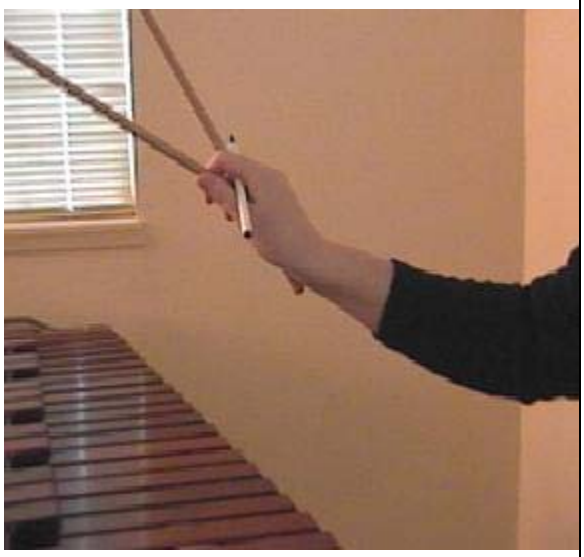
Image 2.35

Ms. Spencer initially began experimenting with using these types of stickings for single note lines while practicing jazz improvisation on the vibraphone.

Though she has yet to write for the following technique in any of her solos for marimba, Ms. Spencer employs a six-mallet grip in her playing as well. Her particular style of holding the three mallets in each hand evolved from holding a pen in her right hand along with two mallets while composing at the marimba. Image 2.36 demonstrates one hand of her six-mallet grip.

Image 2.36

Notice in the above video example, image 2.36, that the inside two mallets are held normally and that the outside, or third mallet, is placed behind the index finger and thumb, and on top of the inside two mallets. Intervallic changes are made by moving the inside two mallets. The following two images, 2.37 and 2.38, show how this grip evolved from its practical origin of notating music while at the marimba.

Image 2.37	Image 2.38
	

In 1998 Julie Spencer related to me the experience of having had a student approach her after a clinic she gave at the Berklee School of Music in Boston. The student commented to Ms. Spencer that she did a lot of things like his teacher did and visa-versa, not realizing that she had had prior contact with his teacher. For Ms. Spencer, the experience was

> odd, and I was startled, because I've been teaching a lot of these things going on sixteen years now, and it didn't occur to me that without having a method book in print making an association of these ideas and these grips with me, and that as they get disseminated in the percussion world,

> that the connection would be lost. It was interesting that it had gone so far as for someone to not know that the things he (this student) had been learning had been ideas that I had, as far as I know, initially introduced to his teacher [3].

The realization that her ideas were starting to make an impact on people, who were, in essence "one generation" removed from her teaching, proved to Ms. Spencer that the ideas themselves are strong enough to be beneficial to people "without them necessarily being taught *by* me. It wasn't necessarily who was teaching them, so much as the fact that the ideas themselves have merit and are useful" [3]. She added that she felt as though someone else would have eventually come along to think about these things if she had not. And ultimately, that "makes me feel grateful for having had them" [3].

Chapter 3: The Solo Marimba Literature

In 1992 Julie Spencer and her husband started their own publishing company, largely to keep up with a growing body of literature that was being composed by the two of them. Ms. Spencer had already had her solo *Cat Clock* published in 1987 by Studio 4 Productions, a company only interested in publishing one or two solos a year, while Ms. Spencer on the other hand, did not want to mete her compositions out this slowly [4]. Additionally, she was concerned about copyright issues, and the end result is that there are currently fourteen of Ms. Spencer's solos for marimba that are published (in addition to two vibraphone solos and her various other works mentioned in Chapter 1) by their company, Spencer Blume Publishing. This chapter presents an introductory survey by examining these marimba solos with regards to their programmatic background, form, texture, harmonic content, performance and stylistic concerns, and requisite technical skills as related to the techniques presented in Chapter 2.

The Children's Suite

Ms. Spencer's earliest published solos comprise what she refers to as her "Children's Suite" for marimba, though these solos have never been published under that collective heading. These solos include *Ice Cream* (1982), *Fire Elves* (1984), *Mountain Stream* (1984), and *Cat Clock* (1984). Each of these four solos share some similar characteristics with regards to length (the shortest, *Ice Cream*, at fifty-six measures, and *Mountain Stream*, the longest, at one hundred and twenty-two, are the among the shortest of Ms. Spencer's solos), harmonic content (Ionian and Lydian modes, juxtaposed tonal

areas a half-step apart), and technical style (block chords, alternating double vertical strokes, and interlocking right and left hand rhythms).

Ms. Spencer cites Claire Omar Musser's various etudes as being a structural and harmonic influence on these four pieces [3], and *Ice Cream* probably shares the most overt similarities with Musser's etudes, particularly his Etude in C, Op.6, No. 10, and his Etude, Op.6, No. 9. Figures 3.1 and 3.2 demonstrate this similarity of rhythmic style and harmonic content.

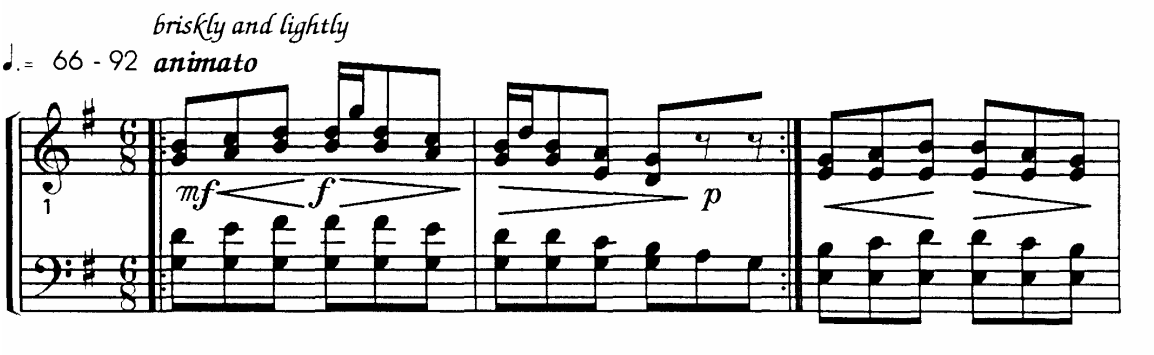


Fig. 3.1 *Ice Cream*, mm.1-3

Fig. 3.2, Etude, Op.6, No. 10, mm.1-5

Ms. Spencer describes *Ice Cream* as being about "the essence of childhood enjoyment of a simple pleasure" [3], and there is nothing musically to contradict that description, given its simple and playful themes and consonant G Ionian tonality (save for a few altered dominant chords). The four-voice homophonic material of measures 1 through 16 and measures 28 through 39 are linked together with an eleven measure

transition section that requires the performer to sustain an independent roll in the right hand while left hand double vertical strokes play slightly altered thematic material vaguely reminiscent of Schiller's *Ode to Joy*. The piece's playfulness continues to the very end, as Ms. Spencer makes use of the clichéd "Good Evening Friends" closing material.

The primary technical considerations of this piece are in maintaining tempo and an "exuberant buoyancy" [3] throughout, and the two roll passages that require the performer to execute independent rolls between a major second interval in both the right and left hands. (Typically independent rolls are easier to perform with a wider interval spread of a fourth or fifth, as the mallets have more leverage as the interval sizes increase).

Fire Elves shares a similar block chordal texture with *Ice Cream* and the Musser etudes, yet at the same time Ms. Spencer seems to be making this style more her own, by incorporating greater extremes in register, angular melodic contours, "2 against 3" rhythmic activity, an expanded tonality that obscures any real sense of a tonal center, triads and scalar lines based on the Lydian mode, and right and left hand tonalities that are a half-step apart. Figure 3.3 illustrates a number of these features.

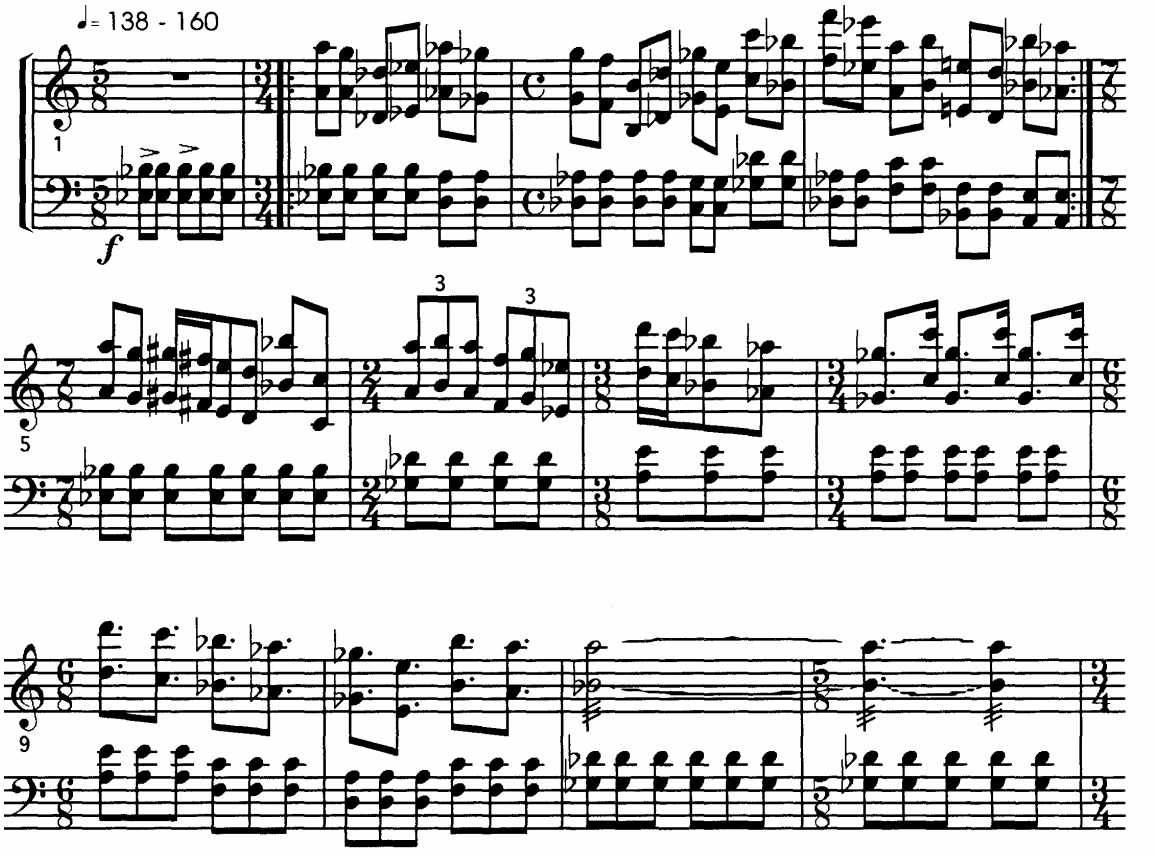


Fig. 3.3 *Fire Elves*, mm.1-12

A loosely based rounded binary form, the piece features a lengthy, contrasting middle section that is more contrapuntal in texture. An illusion of intensity and uneasiness is maintained throughout this section by a continued lack of a tonal center, achieved by the juxtaposition of an open fifth pedal point on the pitches *a* and *e* in the left hand, and a right hand melody that implies an *f-sharp* whole tone scale (see Fig. 3.4). This section also contains a musical quote of the familiar melody "Mary Had a Little Lamb", cleverly disguised by the use of rhythmic displacement and left hand whole-tone accompaniment.

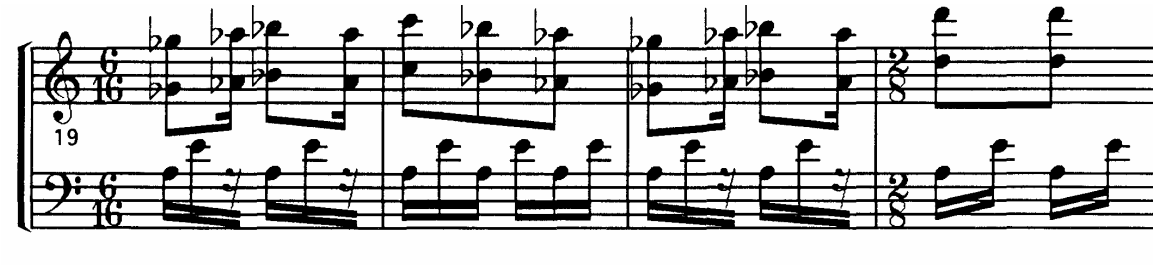


Fig. 3.4 *Fire Elves*, mm. 19-22

While the piece does not place any unique technical demands on the performer, the lengthy right-hand octave sections could be played more comfortably by utilizing Ms. Spencer's approach to wide-interval double vertical strokes as described in Chapter 2.

It is in the two other solos comprising the Children's Suite, *Mountain Stream* and *Cat Clock*, that we begin to see a musical manifestation of Ms. Spencer's experiments with new techniques. *Mountain Stream*, like *Fire Elves*, makes use of both Lydian mode tonality and as shown in figure 3.5 below, simultaneously occurring triads a half-step apart.

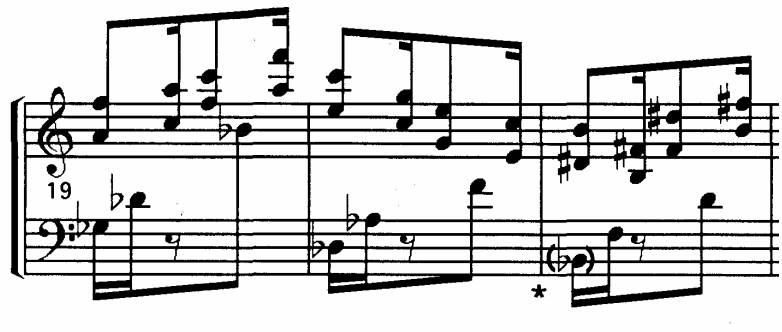


Fig. 3.5 *Mountain Stream*, mm.19-21

This solo is more important in Ms. Spencer's body of literature because of its pervasive use of a three-note right hand figure: the beginnings of Ms. Spencer's concept of the three-point turn. It is used repeatedly throughout the first half of the piece both as

part of a melodic line, as in figure 3.6, and as a melodic fragment in transition material, as in figure 3.7

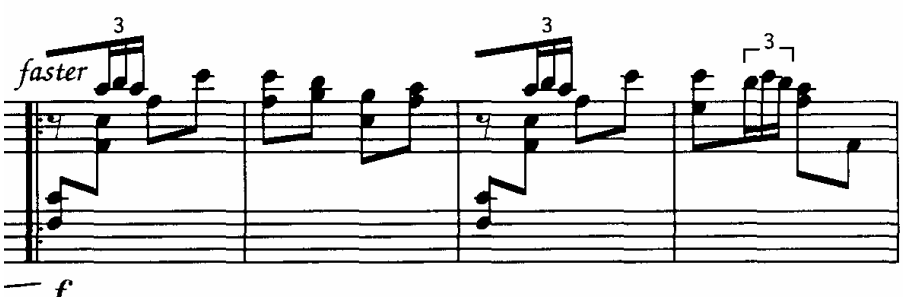


Fig. 3.6 *Mountain Stream*, mm.34-37

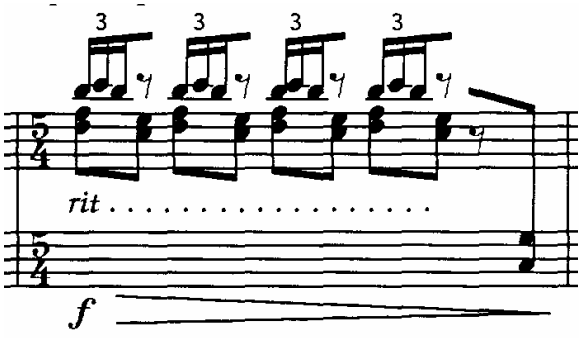


Fig. 3.7 *Mountain Stream*, m.51

The most interesting use of this three note figure however, is as the rhythmic basis of a long middle section marked "fluidly". This middle section, still in the tonality of F Lydian, is, at forty-six measures, the longest of the piece. It is a continuous succession of cascading sixteenth- notes in 6/8 meter, helping to depict the title's imagery of nature. These sixteenth-note figures are very similar to the arpeggio exercise presented in the previous chapter, and like that exercise combining the three-point turn with both lateral movement and interval changes with the fingers. This also marks one of the few times up to this point that Ms. Spencer felt compelled to include mallet stickings in one of her solos. (See Fig. 3.8.)

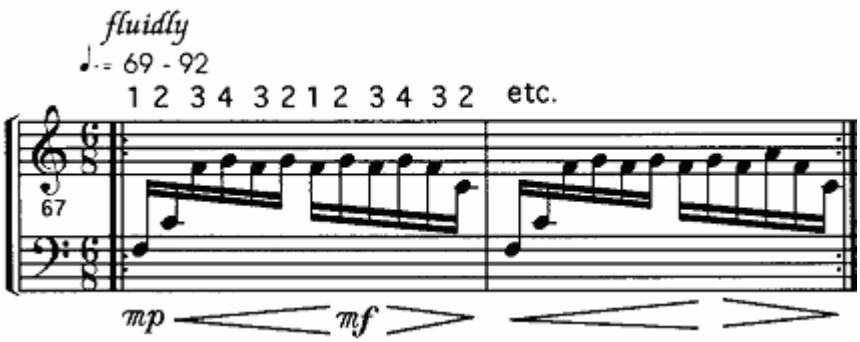


Fig. 3.8 *Mountain Stream*, mm. 67-69

With regards to mallet stickings, Ms. Spencer has always preferred to leave those choices up to the individual performer unless, as is the case with the above musical example, there is a greater underlying technique that needs to be communicated, via the printed page, much in the manner of an etude. *Cat Clock* is also unique in this regard, for in order to convey the principles of her horizontal concept and one-mallet roll across to the performer, she had to include not only mallet stickings, but performance instructions as well.

Cat Clock, like a number of Ms. Spencer's solos, was begun initially as a practice piece [3] and techniques required to perform both the left hand accompaniment to *Cat Clock* and the one-mallet roll were documented in the previous chapter.

The first movement of the original published version of the piece contains Ms. Spencer's poetry for speaking voice. In it she describes the experience, as a child, of watching a clock in the shape of a cat, on the wall of her church's nursery. She tells of how the cat's tail would "twitch in perfect time and his eyes would shift from left to right." [8] This visual imagery is musically represented by the metronomic left hand accompaniment, which continues through the entire piece. Set against this ostinato is a

main melody in C Major that recurs several times in the eighty-four measure piece. Fig.3.9 depicts both the left hand accompaniment and right hand main theme.

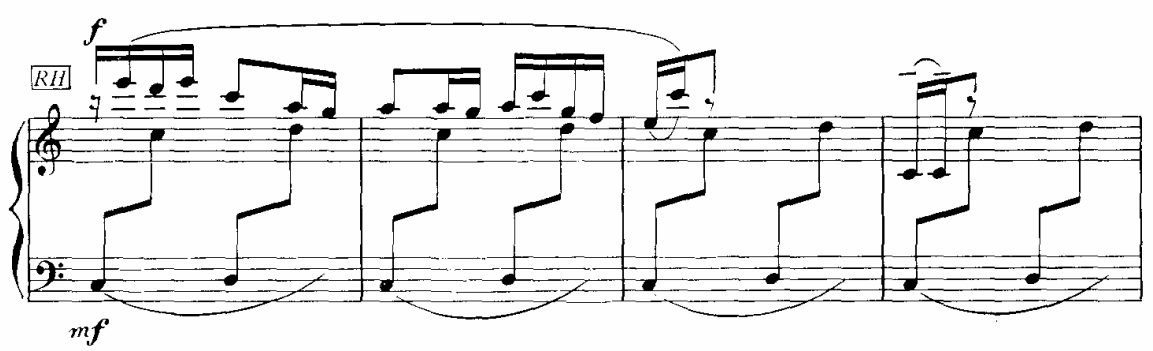
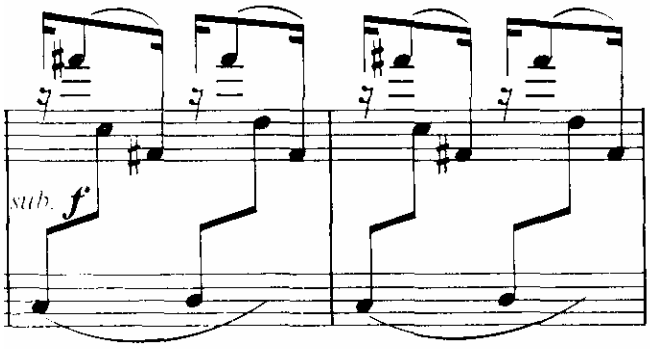


Fig. 3.9 *Cat Clock*, mm.5-8

The various recurrences of the C Major melody in the right hand are energetically juxtaposed with two short "outbursts" tonally suggesting an *f-sharp* pentatonic scale. The aural effect of this is quite a startling contrast to the almost innocent and childlike C Major melody, and the visual effect of both the right and left hands making two-octave leaps in this sort of windshield wiper motion is memorable as well. (See Fig. 3.10.)



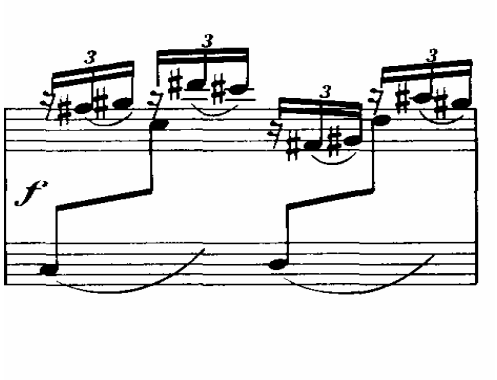


Fig. 3.10 *Cat Clock,* mm.23-24 and m.27

After a final statement of the main melody, the intensity of the piece gradually lessens to a pianissimo ending. By incorporating the one-mallet roll and a sparser left-hand accompaniment, the end is suggestive of the clock gradually winding down to a stop. (See Fig. 3.11)

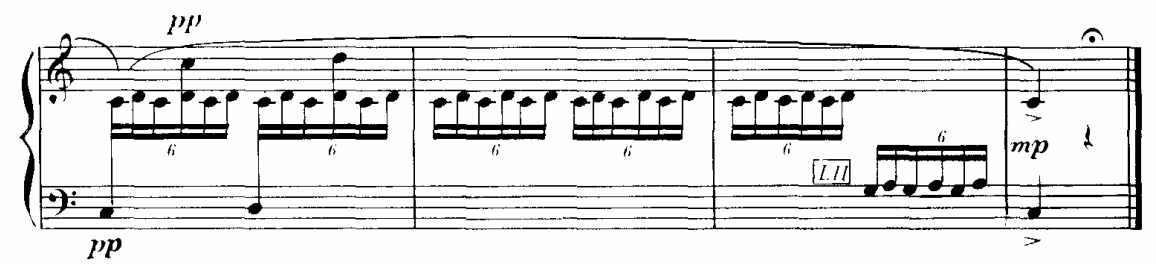


Fig. 3.11 *Cat Clock*, mm.81-84

Cat Clock is still frequently performed by Ms. Spencer in her clinic and master class appearances, and remains one of her most well-known pieces.

The "Ask" Solos

Ms. Spencer's 1992 recording "Ask" featured a number of solos that comprise the largest part of her solo marimba literature to date. They all bear a publication date of 1993, yet were actually composed at different times between the years 1988 and 1993. In general these solos typify, I feel, the musical style and associations most commonly made with Julie Spencer's overall sound as a composer. It is in these solos that she began

incorporating a number of the elements discussed in Chapter 1, including improvised sections, jazz harmonic language, world music elements, and in a number of the solos, extreme lyricism.

All of these elements are present in Ms. Spencer's solo *Tribeca Sunflower*. Like *Cat Clock*, it is one of her more well-known pieces, being frequently performed on college percussion recitals. It exists in published format not only as a solo piece, but also as a marimba quartet involving challenging parts for all four performers. It was originally composed by Ms. Spencer as a piece for her group "Colored Fish", and was debuted by them in their 1991 Percussive Arts Society International Convention concert. *Tribeca Sunflower* owes its title to the area of the same name in New York City (an acronym for "Triangle Below Canal Street), where, while visiting, Ms. Spencer noticed the contrast of a bronze statue of a sunflower amidst a garden of real sunflowers, and the contrast of the small town feel of the Tribeca area versus the expansiveness of the city. She remembers being

> so struck by this vision, this quiet little spot in the middle of New York City, and it struck me that it was the same. Here's this statue-this art object-of a sunflower, and right next to it is the real sunflower. The place Tribeca was kind of like the real sunflower and New York City was the metaphor for the man-made thing, the statue [4].

The appeal of *Tribeca Sunflower* is due in part, in my opinion, to its strong rhythmic sense, its straight-forward F Mixolydian tonality, and its subtle world music connotations. The piece is intended to be played with a set of two specially prepared mallets, now produced by the Mike Balter Mallet company, and referred to as "Tribeca

Mallets". The mallets have a number of thin dowel rods (around 1/8th of an inch in diameter) fastened to the mallet shafts, directly behind the mallet heads, so that the dowel rods and the mallet heads strike the marimba bar together. "I wanted the marimba to sound more percussive…like an mbira (African thumb piano) with the coke bottle lids on top: messy, gorgeous and raw sounding" [4]. This idea occurred to Ms. Spencer during a period in her practice when she was trying to "get as many different sounds out of the instrument as I could…I always wanted the marimba to sound like something else, for the hands and mallets to do things that I didn't see other hands and mallets doing" [4]. This period of experimentation resulted not only in the idea for the Tribeca mallets, but also in a 1988 recording titled "Lost and Found", released on the Spencer Blume label in 1999, which featured Ms. Spencer on marimba and voice, utilizing a four-track recorder to overdub a number of unusual marimba sounds and effects.

Tribeca Sunflower is a ternary structure whose "A" section is in the key of F Mixolydian and in 2/4 meter. A strong rhythmic propulsion is achieved by the use of perpetual motion sixteenth-notes split between the right and left hands. (see Fig. 3.12)

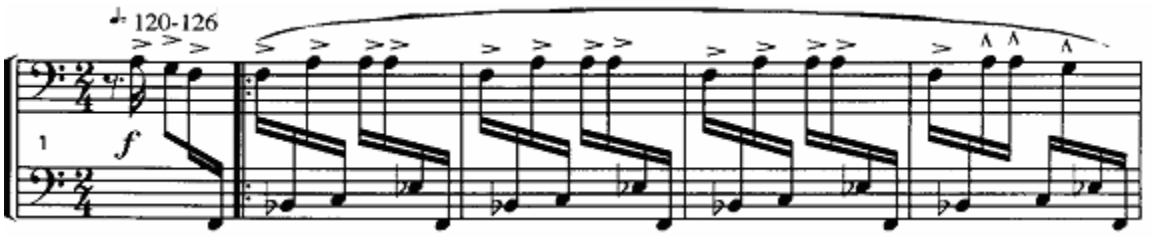


Fig 3.12 *Tribeca Sunflower*, mm.1-5

Following this is a long middle section which provides contrast through a shift to the key areas of A Minor and E Major, a challenging meter change to 13/16, and a more static melody, centered around the pitches *a* and *b*. (Fig. 3.13)

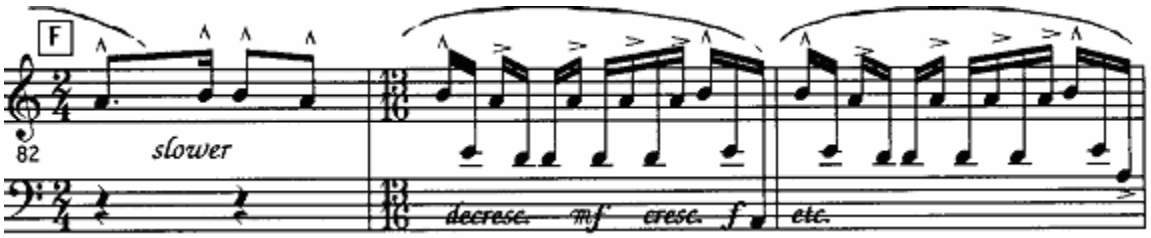


Fig. 3.13 *Tribeca Sunflower*, mm.82-84

Aside from negotiating the meter, the major technical challenge of this section of the piece is the large interval leaps required of the left hand. In measures 95 and 97 for example, and measure 83 in figure 3.13 above, the left hand is required to execute a leap of over an octave and a half, on consecutively occurring sixteenth-notes. Note accuracy can be a problem here, given the fact that this is a two, rather than four-mallet piece. Were the piece played with four mallets it would be impossible to incorporate the dowel rods, which are integral to the overall sound and concept. By incorporating Ms. Spencer's horizontal concept of left-hand technique utilized in *Cat Clock* though, note accuracy of this left hand part can be greatly improved.

Providing even further contrast is a section at measure 143 marked "lyrically", marked both by a return of the tonic key area, and where the predominate rhythm is an eight-note triplet, resulting in a thinner, more transparent texture.

Following a return of the opening sixteenth-note texture and hand-to-hand rhythms, Ms. Spencer provides an open bar in measure 238, instructing the performer to "improvise similarly", free from chordal restraints. The percussion ensemble quartet version also includes an open solo section, and one could always skip these sections if desired. In my own experience though, I have found that these solo sections have provided a rewarding experience for my students, particularly those with little or no prior tonal improvisation experience. The simple, static harmonic scheme for this section in

both the solo and ensemble version has provided a safe and comfortable beginning improvisation experience.

Following this open solo section, the final statement of the "A" theme and its consequent (m.248), have been altered rhythmically to provide a strong sense of forward momentum. Instead of keeping this section primarily in 2/4 meter as it is in the exposition, Ms. Spencer alternates 2/4 with 7/16 and 6/16 for the antecedent phrase, and 7/16, 6/16, and 5/16 for the consequent phrase. (see Fig. 3.14 below) Each bar becomes one sixteenth-note shorter than the previous one which helps propel the entire phrase to its conclusion.

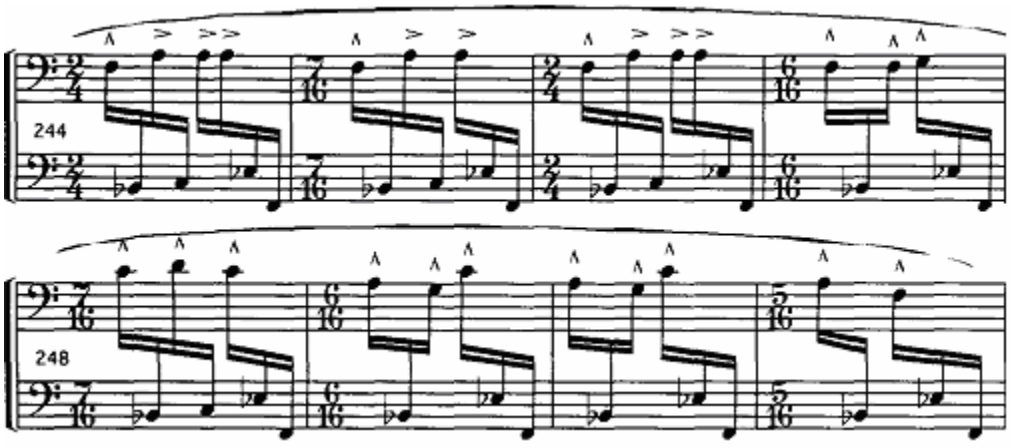


Fig. 3.14 *Tribeca Sunflower*, mm.244-251

The following video example, image 3.1, demonstrates Ms. Spencer performing the last section (mm. 285 to end) of the piece. Notice particularly the relaxed motion of her left wrist in performing a series of major seventh interval leaps between the pitches *f*2 and *e-flat*3.

Image 3.1

Tribeca Sunflower and *Cat Clock* are the only two-mallet solos composed by Julie Spencer. In discussing her four-mallet technique with marimbist Gordon Stout in "Percussive Notes" magazine, she made the assertion that "when alternating the mallets you get the same degree of independence with each hand as on the piano….the mallets in each hand serve the same function as the five fingers. This heightens the marimba's potential as a solo instrument" [11]. Nowhere in Ms. Spencer's body of solo marimba compositions is this statement more applicable, I feel, than in her solo *White Squirrel*.

Written for the most part in a melody and accompaniment style, the density of notes in the right-hand melody, and at times the left-hand accompaniment as well, suggest at first glance, a piece written for solo piano rather than marimba. While the rhythms for the right hand are predominantly sixteenth-notes and the left hand accompaniment consists of eighth-notes, several sections, such as mm.95-99, place equal demand on both hands, indicative of this pianistic style (fig. 3.15).

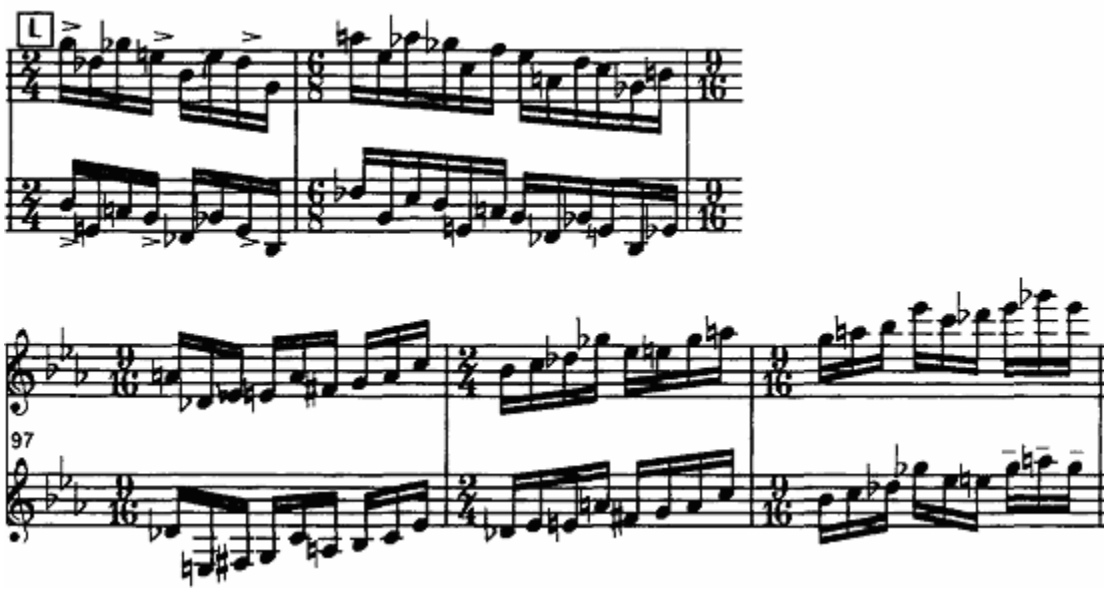


Fig. 3.15 *White Squirrel*, mm.95-99

The piece's title is a double-entendre, reflecting for Ms. Spencer both the literal experience of having seen a white (albino) squirrel, and imagining it as a loner and an outcast, and feeling herself at the time a bit alone personally and creatively. More importantly though, Ms. Spencer cites this piece as "a turning point" [4] for her in the use of jazz harmony, particularly extended harmonies and modality. Indeed it is impossible to identify one tonal center in a harmonic analysis of *White Squirrel*. At times it makes use of various harmonic areas including the Dorian and Lydian modes, scale shapes such as the diminished scale (as in fig. 3.15 above), the harmonic minor scale, and a variable sixth scale degree suggesting either a Dorian or natural minor scale shape. Measures 47 through 59, and its return, in measures 124 through 135, make use of quartal harmony in a planing style, suggestive of not only a jazz piano style, but of a late Romantic piano piece in the style of Chopin or Debussy.

The piece does not lend itself well to a formal analysis either. A formal analysis based on melodic material reveals the complex structure of introduction, A, B, C, D, E, F,

G, C (transposed), C (original key), D (with variation), and finally E. Speaking from personal experience, this complex structure makes the solo a difficult one to memorize, and this may be the result of Ms. Spencer's compositional process used for *White Squirrel*. Each small section originated as an improvisation that she then recorded, transcribed, and finally edited.

The high degree of melodic activity and freedom indicative of the right hand melodic lines of *White Squirrel* were a natural outgrowth of her use of the technique described in Chapter 2 whereby single-note lines are executed with primarily a "3-4-3-4" mallet sticking. Another technique of Ms. Spencer's that was not presented in Chapter 2 however, and one that she began to exploit heavily both in this piece and subsequent ones, is her unique method of playing grace note figures. Here is an upper-neighbor grace note figure from *White Squirrel*, the *e-flat* grace note on the "and" of beat five. (fig. 3.16).

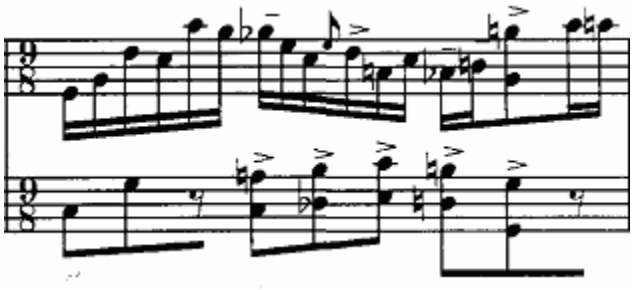


Fig. 3.16 *White Squirrel*, m.87

Common practice would be to play the *e-flat* grace note with the outside right (#4) mallet and the accented note *d* with the inside right mallet (#3). Ms. Spencer does the exact opposite, as shown in image 3.2.

Image 3.2

In image 3.2 above, Ms. Spencer plays the "black key" upper-neighbor grace note (*e*-flat) with her inside right mallet, which allows her to keep her right elbow comfortably at her side and thus eliminating tension, rather than having to extend the elbow away from her body in order to play the grace note with the outside right mallet. This also allows her to incorporate the grace note more smoothly into a melodic line, as in figure 3.16 above. This particular grace note configuration of upper-manual note to lower-manual note (black key to white key) appears numerous times in *White Squirrel* and other solos, as do lower-neighbor grace notes such as the one on beat four of the right hand melody in the following musical example. (fig.3.17)

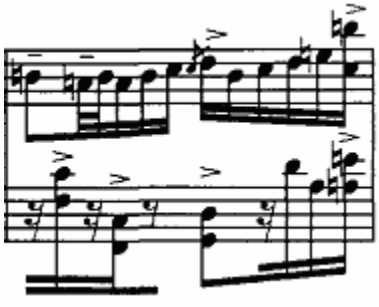


Fig. 3.17*White Squirrel*, m.78

Figure 3.17 is noteworthy as well in that the thirty-second note figure on beat two is another example of a three-point turn integrated into the melody line.

Image 3.3 depicts how Ms. Spencer often plays lower-manual (white key) lower-neighbor grace notes, such as the *c* to *d* in the above musical example.

Image 3.3

Notice in the above video example, image 3.3, that she turns her wrist over and plays the ornament itself with the outside right mallet and the primary note with the inside right mallet, which is the reverse of common practice. It should be noted that she plays upper-neighbor lower manual grace notes (white key to white key: for example *g* to *f*) and lower-neighbor upper manual to lower manual grace notes (black key to white key: *c-sharp* to *d* for example) in the normal manner whereby the primary note is played with the outside right mallet and the grace note is played with the inside right. Essentially then, Ms. Spencer has not two but four ways of playing grace note figures, with each one better suited to helping her execute a particular grace note/primary note configuration in the most relaxed and efficient manner possible.

Grace note figures aside, the primary challenge of *White Squirrel* is the rhythmically active right hand melody throughout. The difficult, highly sectionalized structure of the piece is a result of it having its basis in the improvisatory process, a process which informs the following three published solos from the "Ask" recording as well.

The solos *Chelsea Window*, *After the Storm*, and *Pink Elisa Spring* all share similarities with regards to tonality, formal structure, and technical demands, and all three contain sections that were improvised by Ms. Spencer when they were recorded for "Ask", and later transcribed for publishing purposes. These solos are an outgrowth of a point in Ms. Spencer's concertizing during the late nineteen-eighties when she began to feel that her earlier solos, the *Children's Suite* for example, were too short in length. So with these solos, she began to improvise "lead-sheet" fashion in the same manner as any jazz musicians would, say over the melody and chord changes to "Body and Soul" or any other "fake book" tune [3]. In fact, her solo *Summer Music*, also contained on the "Ask" recording, was one of the pieces she performed the most when she was doing solo marimba concerts during this period [3], yet it still only exists in lead sheet format in the "Red" volume of her *Unbook*.

Whereas *White Squirrel* made use of extended harmonies, obscured tonality and a rhythmically complex melodic structure, these three solos exhibit more straightforward, mostly diatonic harmony, a strong sense of tonal center, and a simpler melodic structure exhibiting both lyricism and use of space. All three solos for example, make strong use of what might be called "jazz harmonies" including major and minor seventh chords, dominant seventh chords (occasionally altered), and added chord tones including the

sixth, ninth, and thirteenth. Except for a few instances of chromatic planing the chords are nearly all diatonic, lending to each piece's clearly identifiable tonality.

Chelsea Window was written shortly after *White Squirrel*, while Ms. Spencer was staying at the Chelsea Hotel in New York City. Inspired by the view from her hotel window, she remembers "being struck by the multiculturalism of New York City " [4]. Written in a melody and accompaniment style, it exhibits a sparseness of texture that is in sharp contrast to *White Squirrel*, as seen in figure 3.18.

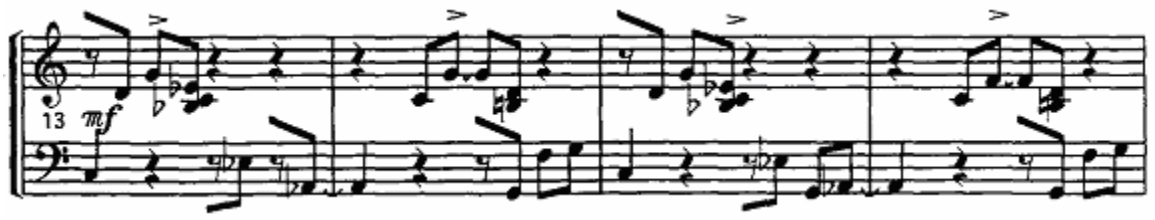


Fig. 3.18 *Chelsea Window*, mm.13-16

This use of space in both the right hand melody and left hand accompaniment is a predominant feature throughout the piece, and coupled with the C Aeolian/Dorian tonality lends the piece an overall introspective character. When the melodic activity does increase, it is only slightly, maintaining only eighth-notes as its greatest subdivision and moving mostly in a smooth, stepwise motion.

The piece is in a ternary form that modulates to B-flat Dorian in its "B" section, and a return to "A" that is marked more by the return of the C Minor tonality rather than any repetition of previous melodic material. And this formal structure is probably more indicative of the piece's improvisational nature as it was composed, but "with a lot of improvising" [5] during the recording, and only then transcribed and published.

This last "A" section however, exhibits several interesting features. First, it features an optional solo section over a written bass pattern that implies the C Dorian

mode and a loose *c-7, F7, G* chord progression. Second, and perhaps reflective of both the multi-cultural New York experience and the improvisational process, measures 139-146 are written in an interesting Latin "piano montuno" style. (see fig. 3.19)

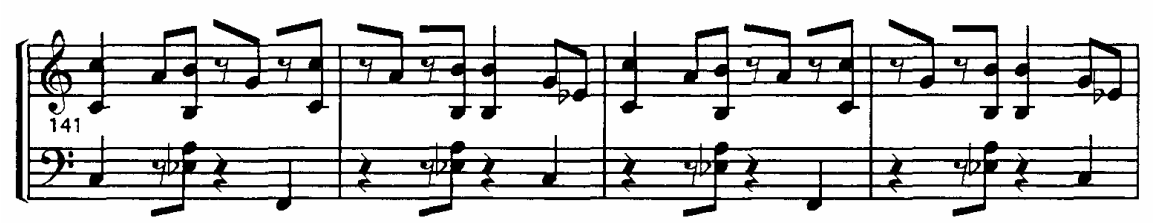


Fig. 3.19 *Chelsea Window*, mm.141-144

Lastly and more importantly, this section exhibits another integration of Ms. Spencer's three-point turn concept, embedded in the following sixteenth-note run that closes the piece. Figure 3.20 below shows the 3-4-3 mallet sticking of the three-point turn, followed by the fourth sixteenth-note of each beat which is played by the inside left mallet.

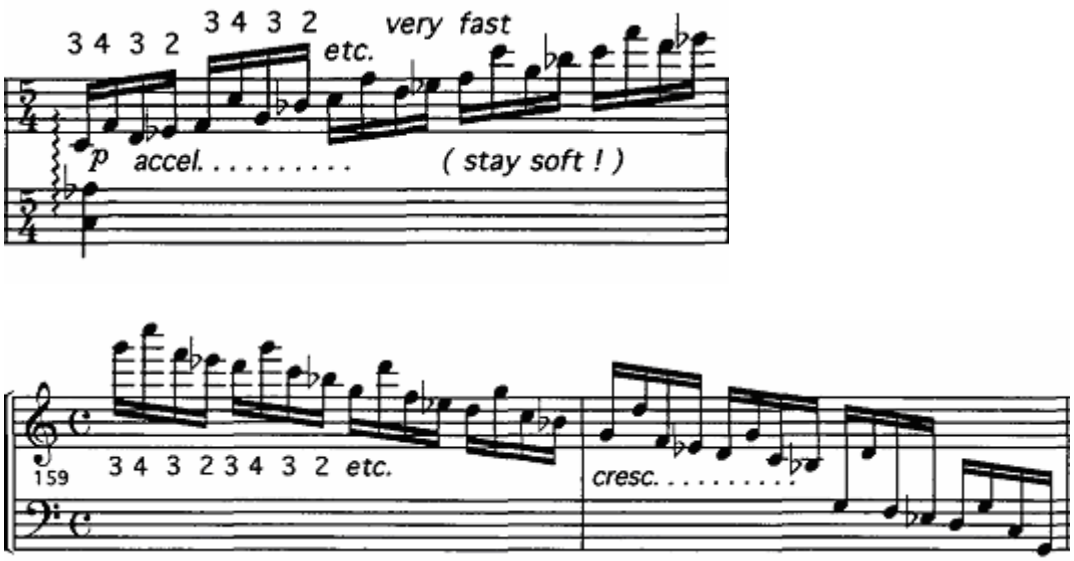


Fig. 3.20 *Chelsea Window*, mm.158-160

Using the three-point turn in this manner allows Ms. Spencer to execute a passage like this in the most relaxed and efficient manner possible, which has always been the goal of her technique. Similarly, the way she performs the left-hand accompaniment to

her solo *After the Storm* confirms her previously quoted statement that "I'm trying to be relaxed as I can when I play" [1].

After the Storm features a lyrical and sparse melody set in the key of F Major, over a left-hand ostinato that continues through the entire piece. Like *Chelsea Window* this solo was partially improvised in the studio, though here there is a more literal return of the main thematic material, strengthening its three-part formal structure. Its title, like many other solo titles of Ms. Spencer's, is a double-entendre. *After the Storm* was written both after a difficult and unsuccessful week of recording, and quite literally, after a rain storm. It shares a similar character with *Chelsea Window*, owing to its relaxed tempo marking (quarter-note equals 112), an expression marking of "peacefully", and again, its use of a major mode.

The main technical challenge of *After the Storm*, I feel, lies in the ability to stay comfortable and relaxed while maintaining the left-hand ostinato for the duration of the piece, all the time executing the ostinato within the parameters of phrasing, expression, and printed dynamics. Figure 3.21 shows the opening of the solo and this left-hand ostinato, which, after the tonic key of F Major, is transposed alternately to the keys of A-flat Major, F-sharp Major, b Minor, and G Major.

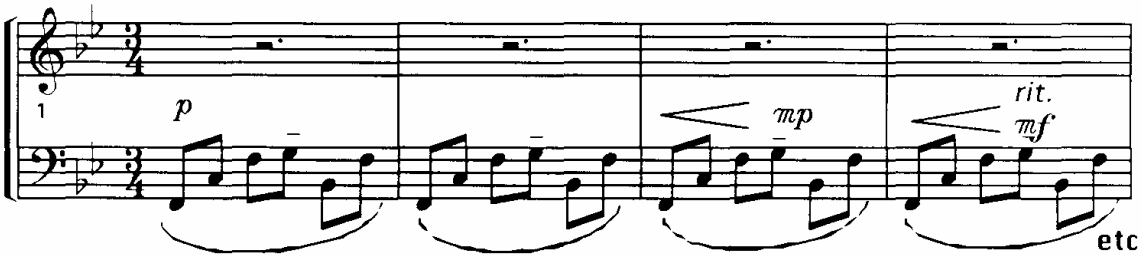


Fig. 3.21 *After the Storm*, mm.1-4

Below is a video example, image 3.4, demonstrating how Ms. Spencer performs this particular passage. Notice how she breaks the fulcrum between the thumb and index finger which hold the inside left mallet, in effect, taking advantage of the natural momentum and rebound of the mallet. This corresponds to the pitches *f* and *g* of the ostinato in figure 3.21 above, which are played by Ms. Spencer with the inside left mallet.

Image 3.4

Image 3.5 demonstrates another example of the same ostinato, but this time from a slightly different perspective.

Image 3.5

This might be construed by many marimbists as an example of poor technique, but it further strengthens Ms. Spencer's previous assertion that "I try to let the mallets do the work by allowing them to do what they can naturally do" [1].

Though *After the Storm* does not contain an open section for improvisation, at one point in my studies with Ms. Spencer she made such a suggestion in an effort to help me develop the independence between the right and left hands needed to perform the piece. She encouraged me to play the left-hand ostinato pattern while both improvising and practicing scales with my right hand. This has proved to be a valuable technique that I have used myself and with students when learning many of the other pieces in the solo marimba repertoire that have a left-hand accompaniment similar to that of *After the Storm*, including Alice Gomez' *Rain Dance*, and Gordon Stout's *Two Mexican Dances*.

Ms. Spencer's solo *Pink Elisa Spring* however, does contain an optional open section for improvisation, and like *Chelsea Window*, contains, in the printed version, a transcription of the solo that she took during the recording of the piece for "Ask". And

like the previous two solos, *Pink Elisa Spring* exhibits both a ternary form and a strong tonal center rooted in the key of A Mixolydian. Its particular melody and accompaniment style, shown below in figure 3.22, is marked by an open-fifth left hand rhythmic pattern suggestive of a Latin tumbao bass line, and a slightly disjunct and fragmented melody that also incorporates a grace note figure.

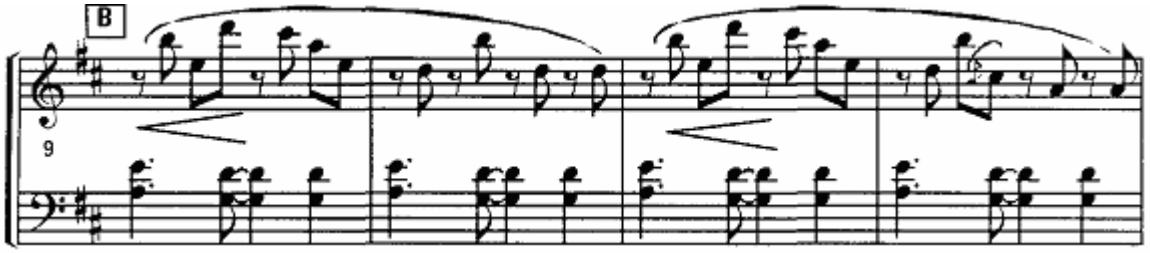


Fig. 3.22 *Pink Elisa Spring*, mm.9-12

This same rhythmic feel continues throughout a lengthy development section that does not modulate so much as shift to the key areas of F Mixolydian, and C Lydian, before a return in its tonic key.

Further evidence of a Latin influence can be seen in the following passage imitative again of a piano montuno figure, and one that appears frequently throughout the solo and in various keys (fig 3.23).

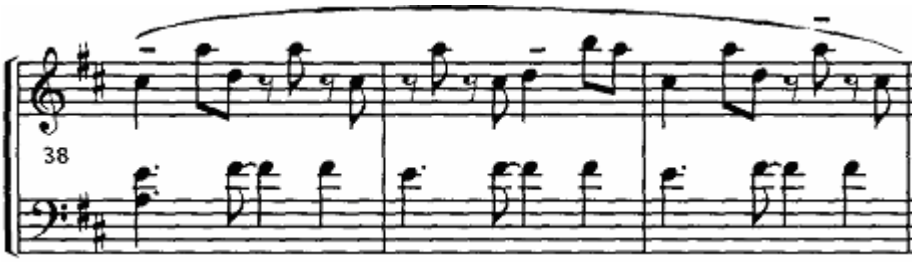


Fig. 3.23 *Pink Elisa Spring*, mm.38-40

Both this montuno figure and the Latin tumbao bass line are a result of Ms. Spencer's informal study of Latin percussion and piano with various Cuban and Puerto-Rican musicians in the Los Angeles area. She was even featured playing timbales on an instructional video by educator and percussionist Jerry Steinholtz titled "The Essence of Congas" [6].

These stylistic factors, coupled with a highly tonal melody, contribute to the piece's overall appeal to listeners and performers alike. And while the piece is highly accessible from a listening standpoint, it is actually a deceptively difficult solo to perform for several reasons. First, in many sections of the piece Ms. Spencer's three-point turn is imbedded into the melodic line in such a way as to make executing the line and the three-point turn at the marked tempo of quarter-note equals 120 rather difficult without a prior knowledge of the concept of the turn. Second, several other passages that feature an angular melodic line of continual eighth-notes with a left hand accompaniment can be problematic with regards to stickings. It should be noted that Ms. Spencer did not provide suggested mallet stickings for these sections, which might be the source of her earlier statement in Chapter 1 that she "gets a lot of calls" [3] regarding stickings.

Figure 3.24 illustrates the second of the two main melodies from the "A" section of *Pink Elisa Spring* (the first is the melody in figure 3.22 above). It is a passage that occurs many times in the piece, both the tonic key of A Major and transposed to other key areas as well. The three-point turn is comprised of the two sixteenth-notes and the following eighth-note of the melodic line in the following musical example.

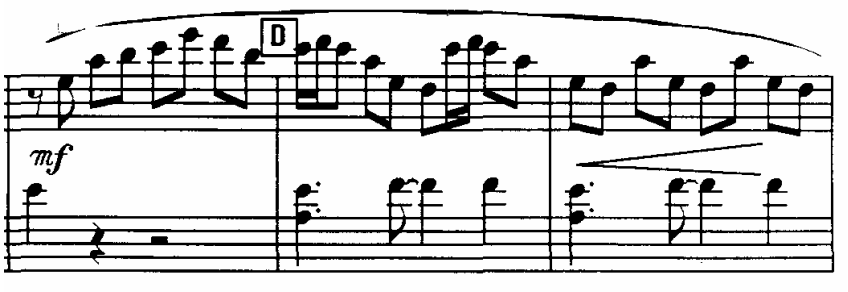


Fig. 3.24 *Pink Elisa Spring*, mm.35-37

Image 3.6 demonstrates this passage, played at several tempos. Notice the 3-4-3 mallet sticking on the pitches *c-sharp, d, c-sharp* of the three-point turn.

Image 3.6

Here is another video example, image 3.7, of Ms. Spencer performing measures 45 through 51 of the solo, in which the same melody is played over the IV chord of D Major, then again in the tonic of A Major.

Image 3.7

This particular melodic usage of the three-point turn permeates the solo, including this longer and syncopated example, here phrased in thirty-second notes (Fig. 3.25).

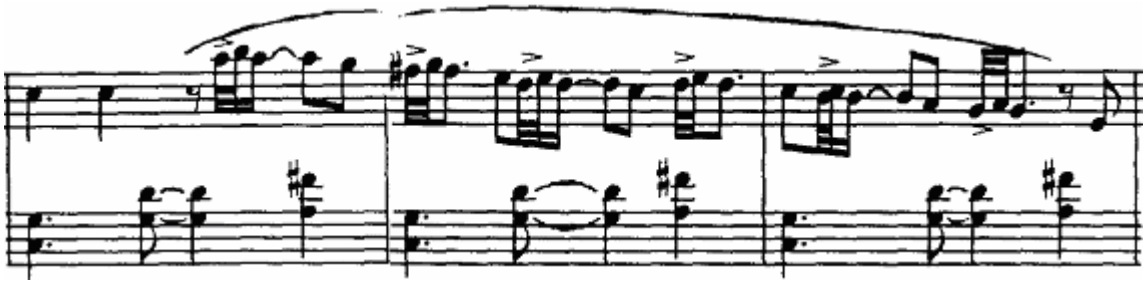


Fig 3.25 *Pink Elisa Spring*, mm 115-117

In measures 140 through 143, near the end of the development section, the three-point turns alternate hands and are phrased in sixteenth-note triplets, similar both to the way they were shown in Chapter 2, and their usage in *Mountain Stream*. Part of the problem with regards to these sections, I feel, is the dilemma of whether or not to include stickings. And this may not have been an issue in Ms. Spencer's mind: whether to include the stickings and in this indirect way demonstrate the three-point turn concept, or not include any stickings and leave the choice entirely to the performer. It is the latter

option though that I feel may have led Gernot Blume to his earlier assertion that without using her techniques, “even if you play the notes, it does not sound quite right” [3]. Ms. Spencer’s technique allows her to play passages such as these in a relaxed and comfortable manner, resulting in a smooth and legato sound.

Figure 3.26 depicts the second problematic area that was mentioned earlier: an angular eighth-note melodic line with left hand accompaniment outlining a series of triads and dominant seventh chords.

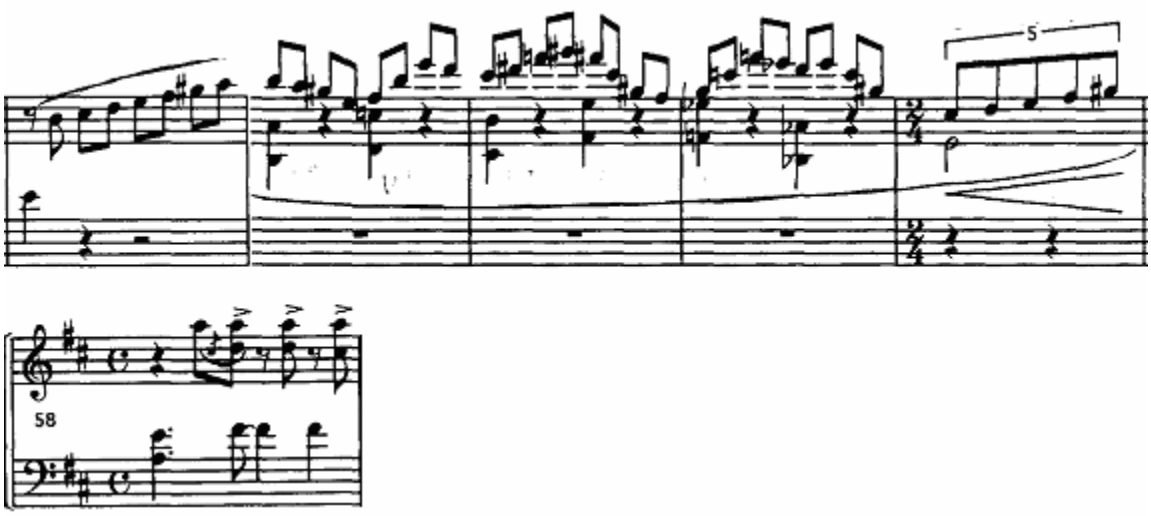


Fig. 3.26 *Pink Elisa Spring*, mm. 53-58

Ms. Spencer demonstrates how she performs this passage, which relies heavily on the technique, demonstrated in Chapter 2, of playing a single note melodic line alternating between the two mallets of the right hand (mallet numbers 3 and 4). It is precisely this technique that gives Ms. Spencer the flexibility and freedom to perform and compose a line such as this. In image 3.8 the passage is performed twice.

Image 3.8

Pink Elisa Spring (whose title comes from Ms. Spencer's experience of seeing a friend's daughter, named Elisa, bathed in the glow of a pink stage light in springtime) represents a high point of Ms. Spencer's use of the three-point turn in her composed solos as it is not found in any of the five marimba solos written after this one.

The composition *Before the Beginning* is a difficult solo written in a chorale style in which all notes are to be rolled (played as a tremolo). It was composed as both a practice piece for Ms. Spencer to work on controlling each individual mallet in the context of a four-mallet tremolo, and as a recital piece for a student of hers at the California Institute of the Arts [4]. The title is derived from Ms. Spencer's feeling that this student needed to have a better understanding of how to approach learning something new.

> I named it *Before the Beginning* because I wanted the student to go back to before the beginning, and to think about "before I start, what is it that I have to address in my attitude, my world-view, and my awareness of self?

What is it that I have to address before I can do this thing that I want to do?" [4]

One feature that makes this solo more difficult than other four-mallet marimba chorales to perform correctly, are the subtle dynamic changes that occur within each of the four mallets throughout the solo. The piece requires that in the context of all four mallets rolling at the same time, any one of the four may be required to be played louder or softer than the others. This is actually a very difficult thing to execute, and Ms. Spencer says that "it's hands down, one of the two most difficult things I've written, if you do all the dynamics. When I recorded it I just held my breath" [4]. In figure 3.27, we see a measure that is indicative of the dynamic shadings required of each voice throughout the piece. Notice that each of the four mallets has a different dynamic marking, and the contrasting crescendi and decrescendi occurring simultaneously.

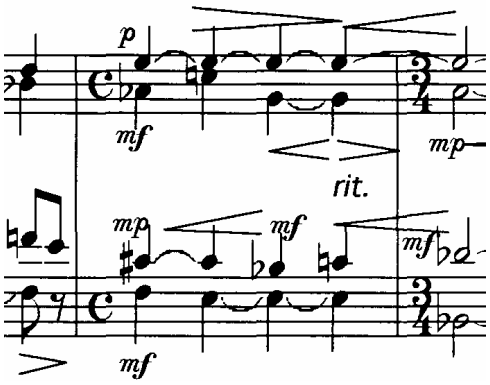


Fig. 3.27 *Before the Beginning*, m.14

In addition to the challenge of these subtle dynamic changes occurring at different times, and between each voice, are the many instances of extreme intervals between the mallets of each hand that are required. Tenths and elevenths are common throughout, and in the left hand no less, where the marimba bars are typically much wider. Here of course, is where Ms. Spencer utilizes the wide-interval roll technique that was

demonstrated in Chapter 2, with the thumb inside of the mallet shaft. The technique, also demonstrated in Chapter 2, of going from a small to large interval quickly is exploited in the piece as well, so that "if you were to see me play this piece live, what you would see is a lot of arm movements that are helping the movements of the mallets. You can't play this piece without your elbows" [4].

The last published solo from Ms. Spencer's "Ask" recording is titled *Gomer in the Desert*. At nearly three-hundred measures in length, it represents a high point in Ms. Spencer's use of setting a right-hand melody against a left-hand ostinato. The programmatic basis for this solo, which was examined in Chapter 1, seems also to have influenced the sense of harmonic and rhythmic conflict that permeates this piece. Gomer, the wife of the prophet Hosea, is metaphorically banished by God to wander the desert in the hope of realizing gratitude. The overall ternary structure of this piece is framed at the beginning and end by introductory and closing material set in 6/8 meter, utilizing ambiguous quartal harmony, and with the initial expression marking of "wandering".

One begins to see evidence in *Gomer in the Desert*, and her compositions that follow, Ms. Spencer's emerging reliance on very descriptive and emotive expression markings. She says that "the words describe the emotional state that the music should come from" [5], and when the introductory material returns after the main body of the solo, its expression markings include "with determination" and "with anticipation". The sense of conflict alluded to above that is present in the body of the piece is effectively conveyed by Ms. Spencer's use of a harmonically unstable left-hand ostinato set in 5/8 and 7/8 meters, and a fragmented melody that employs, at various points, syncopation, rhythmic displacement, and bi-tonality. The following musical example (Fig. 3.28),

which is the first statement of the primary melodic material, illustrates a number of these features.

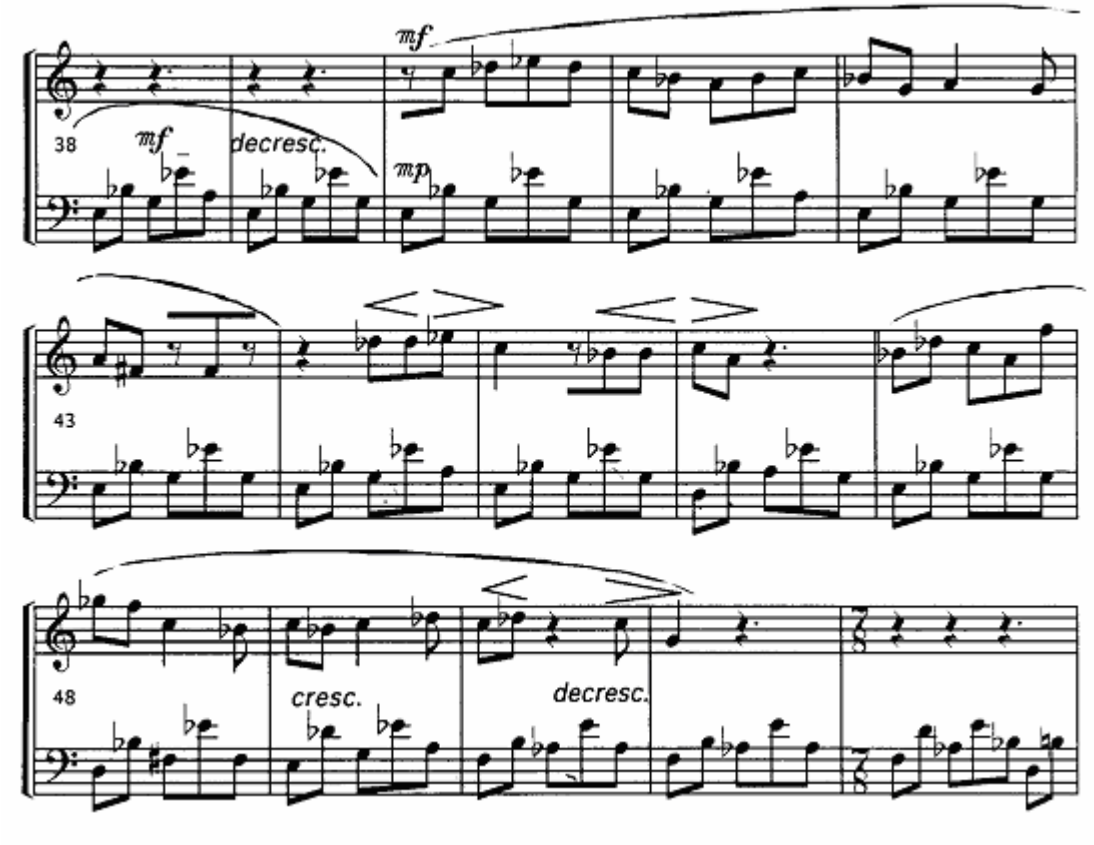


Fig. 3.28 *Gomer in the Desert*, mm.38-52

The harmonically unstable left-hand, outlining a diminished triad and an interval of a major seventh, is set against a twelve measure melody whose pitches do not fall neatly into any one particular scale shape. These pitches could be assembled to form an octatonic scale on *g* (the 1-2, or "whole-step, half-step" configuration) were it not for the presence of the pitch *e-flat* rather than *e-natural*, and likewise a similar closeness to a *d-flat* Lydian or *c* diminshed scale seem possible until the pitches *f* and *f-sharp* are taken in to account. This unstable harmonic language helps to create a sense of tension and conflict consistent with the programmatic issues of the work.

Further effective use of tension, both harmonic and rhythmic is revealed in the second twelve measure phrase, whose last five measures show a syncopated rhythmic figure on the pitches a and *f*-sharp that Ms. Spencer uses repeatedly. (see figure 3.29)

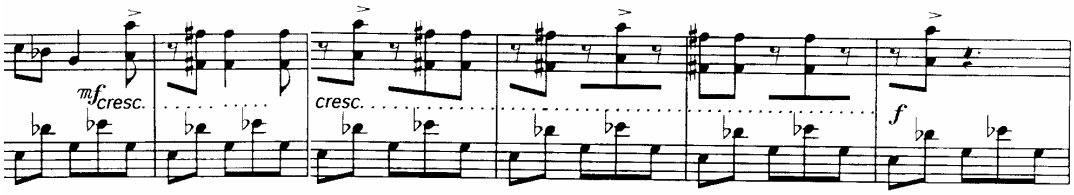


Fig. 3.29 *Gomer in the Desert*, mm.64-69

This syncopated figure, which starts on the fifth eighth-note of the first measure, is seven eighth-notes in length, and hence, each successive entrance is displaced by two eighth-notes. The resulting harmonic tension lies in the juxtaposition of the pitches *f-sharp* in the right hand against the *g* in the left hand.

A new left-hand ostinato, (seen in measure 52 of figure 3.28 above) now suggestive of a *d* diminished triad and scale, forms the basis of a forty-seven measure contrasting "B" section in which a legato melody, now comprised of long note values, is played with a bow. This bowed melody, signifying the voice of God [5] contrasts well with the previous fragmented and rhythmically unsettled melodic material. In the middle of this bowed melody, at measure 120, the performer is additionally required to pick up a gong mallet and prophetically strike a gong, then resume the bowed melody, all the while continuing the left-hand ostinato.

When the main melodic material seen above in figure 3.28 returns, both at its original pitch class level and transposed at the fifth, it is re-orchestrated several ways, including harmonization in minor thirds and doubled at the octave. Though *Gomer in the Desert* is not quite a literal interpretation of the story (in the biblical version Gomer does

not learn the lesson of gratitude), the return of the introductory material, along with eleven bars of closing material with the expression marking "with hope", strongly suggests that it is ultimately Ms. Spencer, not Gomer, who has learned "the importance that gratitude plays in forming our character" [4].

The Later Solos

The large extra-musical issue of religion seen in *Gomer in the Desert* continued to serve as the programmatic basis of her 1994 composition titled *Elim*. This piece was commissioned by Los Angeles studio percussionist Emil Richards, and incorporates two types of mallets specially designed by him and mass-produced by the Vic Firth mallet company. The "Emil Richards Rattle Mallets" are a yarn wrapped keyboard mallet with a round plastic mallet head containing small pellets that rattle in the same manner as a hand-held shaker. When played on a keyboard one hears the simultaneity of the keyboard itself and the rattle sound. Ms. Spencer also included several sections in *Elim* where the mallets are to be shaken in the air, for a purely percussive effect.

The "Emil Richards Slap Mallets" are a birch-handled pair of mallets whose rectangular-shaped heads are made of a foam-filled suede material which produce both a muffled "slap" and a resulting muted sound from the particular instrument on which they are used. And much like the use of the bow and gong in *Gomer in the Desert*, whereby the right hand makes the implement switch while the left hand continues playing, the slap mallets are cleverly integrated into the piece one hand at a time, while the other hand continues playing, which eliminates the need for the performer to stop playing completely and switch mallets.

An anagram for Emil Richards' first name, the solo *Elim* takes as its programmatic basis Exodus 15:22-27, in which Moses leads the Israelites on their long exodus out of slavery in Egypt. Crossing the Red Sea, they continued through desert hardship, coming finally to a desert oasis with plentiful fresh water and palm trees, a place called Elim.

This long desert odyssey endured by the Israelites seems to be manifested in the long and complex formal structure of the piece. At six-hundred and seventy-seven measures in length it is nearly seventeen minutes of non-stop playing. It is a highly sectionalized piece whose main difficulty lies in the challenge of memorization. Just to give an example of its extremely sectionalized nature, Ms. Spencer uses rehearsal letters throughout the piece to mark each of these different sections. Some are as short as six bars (letter H, "Deliberately"), and others, like letter W, for example are as long as thirty-two bars in length. The rehearsal letters (and correspondingly the different sections) run through the alphabet, from A through Z, and then into the "double" alphabet (rehearsal AA, for instance) up to rehearsal letter MM. There are even recurring sections within the second "double" alphabet section, such as "BB1" and later, "BB11" for example. In all there are forty-seven different rehearsal markings in the piece, and some of the longer sections, based on either a change of melodic material or a new expression marking, could have easily been broken into two separate sections had they been edited that way.

In *Gomer in the Desert* Ms. Spencer tried to depict a sense of inner struggle and conflict by creating a musical conflict "between the hands" [5], whereas in *Elim* the "contrasts, the conflicts within the piece, and the tensions, are more sectional. Conceptually and harmonically, it's more a sense of one section of the piece being a

contrast to another section, in my thinking as I wrote it" [5]. I myself performed *Elim* for a recital in the spring of 1998, and my personal experience here is valid, I feel, because to Julie Spencer's knowledge I have am the only person besides herself to have performed the piece. As many times as I have played *Elim*, through the long process of memorization, dress rehearsals, and finally performance, I never failed to experience a wonderful sense of tension and release between its many contrasting sections. Just after I had negotiated a section that was harmonically and/or technically challenging, I would experience one of the more lyrical sections almost anew, with a sense of relief, as if I'd almost forgotten it was coming. I could easily visualize in my mind the cycles of frustration and relief the Israelites must have experienced in their trek through the desert.

These sectional conflicts in *Elim* are achieved in large part through the use of sections that are often angular, containing some dissonance, and set in fast tempi, contrasted with slower, more homophonic, and lyrical sections, often with expression markings such as "calmly", "reflective", or "joyfully". The very first large section of the piece for instance (letters A through C) creates a sense of tension through the use of simultaneous triads a half-step apart, and sixteenth-note rhythms in a rapid tempo, as in figure 3.30 below.

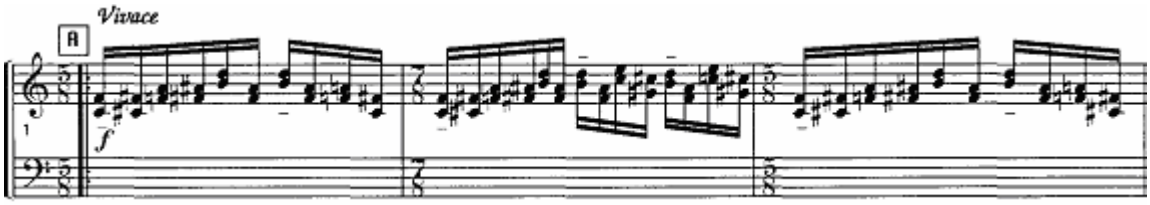


Fig. 3.30 *Elim*, mm.1-3

The melodic material shown above is one of the few instances of recurring material throughout the piece, as is the following example (fig. 3.31), which helps to create conflict through the use of juxtaposed major and minor thirds (*f-sharp* against *f-natural*).

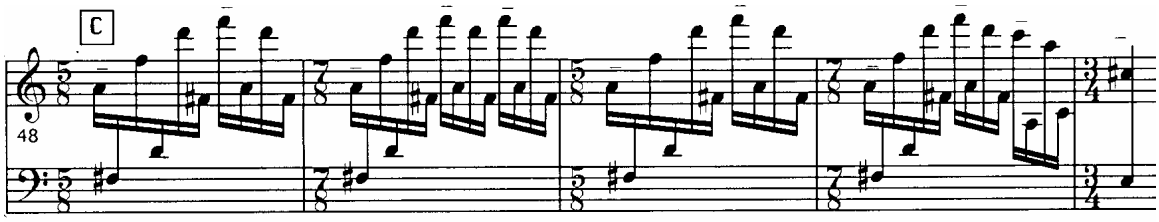


Fig. 3.31 *Elim*, mm. 48-51

Both of the above examples occur throughout the piece in varying length, functioning as what Ms. Spencer refers to as "interjections" [3]. These recurring sections help to give the piece, with its almost through-composed nature, some sense of structural unity.

The Emil Richards Slap Mallets are utilized in a section of *Elim* that is reminiscent of *Tribeca Sunflower*, both in its use of a similar "hands-together" composite style, its use of the Mixolydian mode, and its strong sense of rhythm and "groove" (Fig. 3.32).

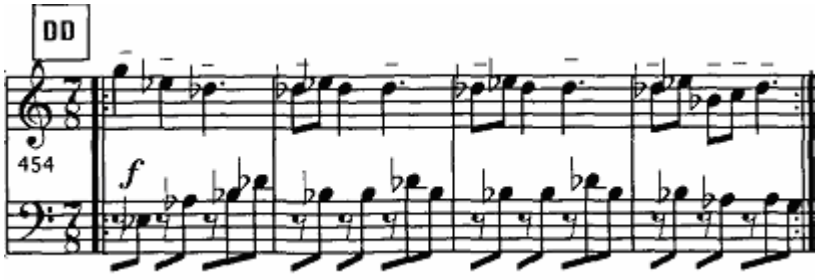


Fig. 3.32 *Elim*, mm.454-457

Quite possibly because *Elim* was a commission, the technical demands required of the piece, while difficult, are not outside the realm of conventional marimba technique. There is no usage of the three-point turn concept for example, very few grace notes, and no instances of a highly active right hand melodic style such as those found in *Pink Elisa Spring*, *White Squirrel*, or many other of Ms. Spencer's solos. Simply put, this piece is a challenge because it is so difficult to memorize, though from my own experience the reward is well worth the effort.

After *Elim* in 1994, Ms. Spencer would not compose and publish another marimba solo until 2000, when both *The Emperor's New Clothes* and *Brothers in Peace* were written. Recalling events highlighted in Chapter 1 though, this atypically longer period between works may be indicative both of Ms. Spencer's stronger focus on improvisation and her increasing family commitments. Indeed Ms. Spencer stated in 1998 that her marimba practice at that time was focused primarily on jazz improvisation techniques including scales, arpeggios, chords, etc., as opposed to composing and performing published marimba solos.

Like *Elim*, *The Emperor's New Clothes* was a commissioned piece, and its title reflects the piece's dedication to the young daughter of a friend. Written primarily in a melody and accompaniment style, *The Emperor's New Clothes* juxtaposes a root to fifth bass line in D-Flat Mixolydian with a seventeen measure right-hand melody in C Major. Borrowing from the nursery tale fable of the same name, the melody, which is somewhat reminiscent of the childhood hymn "Jesus Loves Me", seems to represent the gentle insistence of the child to the emperor (the march-like bass line) that he has no clothes. (see figure 3.33)

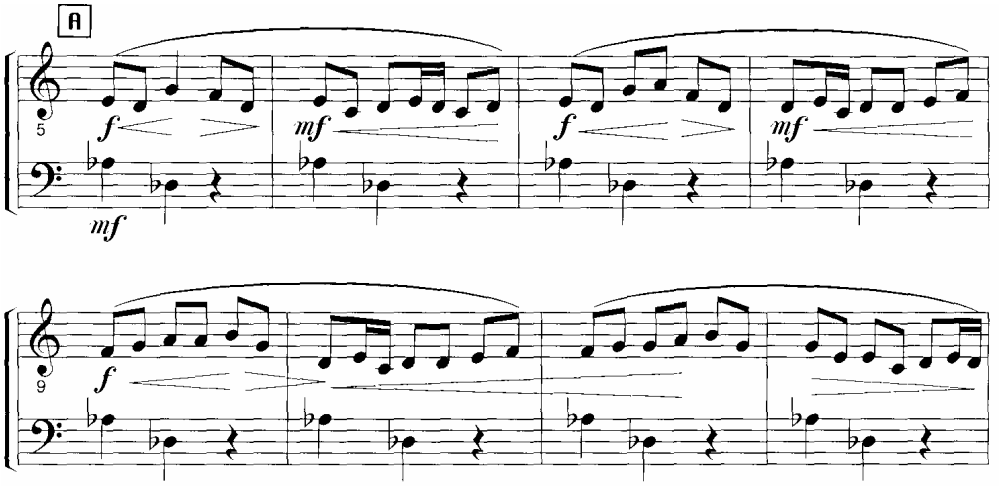


Fig. 3.33 *The Emperor's New Clothes*, mm.5-12

This melody is alternated with five contrasting sections and a coda, and each return of the child-like theme contains slight variations. It is in these varied restatements where the primary technical challenges of the piece lie. The first restatement places both the melody and accompaniment up an octave, and the downbeat of each measure contains both the melody note and the pitch *c* in the upper octave (Fig. 3.34).

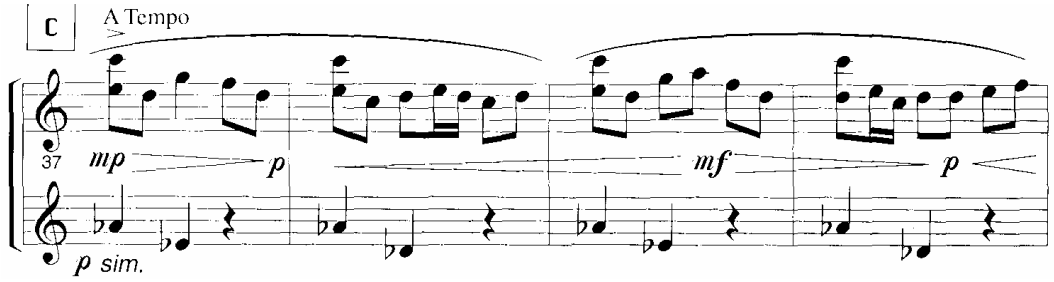


Fig. 3.34 *The Emperor's New Clothes*, mm. 37-40

Though no stickings are indicated, Ms. Spencer intended the melody to be played with a combination of the inside and outside right mallets (numbers 3 and 4 respectively) rather than executing the entire melody with the inside right mallet and reserving the outside right mallet exclusively for the upper octave downbeat pitch of *c* [4]. What this

requires then is the ability to change one's grip from a large interval to a small one very quickly, as demonstrated in Chapter 2.

When this melody is restated a third time, further conflict between the hands is generated through the use of triplet rhythms in the left-hand bass, against the strictly duple rhythms of the right. Subsequent restatements of the main melody find the child's insistence to the emperor growing louder and more vocal: at measure 107 the theme is harmonized in tenths, with a slower tempo marked "Majestic", and a dynamic marking of forte. In a final restatement at measure 129, the left-hand accompaniment is finally brought into line with the right and no longer are the two at odds harmonically. The child has convinced the emperor of the error of his ways.

Ms. Spencer's most recent published solo for marimba, *Brothers in Peace* (2000), represents, in her words a "new generation of piece", and is perhaps indicative of her continued growth and maturation as a composer [5]. In it she abandons any use of jazz-derived harmonies, and employs very little tertian harmony, opting instead for numerous mixed-interval chords, unresolved dissonances, and heavy chromaticism. She employs a very difficult and obscured metric organization that only in a few instances exhibits any strong sense of pulse. In many of the rhythmically active sections of the piece downbeats are frequently avoided and complex rhythms are used. Melodically the piece displays none of the lyricism present in so many other pieces of hers. Much of the piece is comprised of angular single-note lines played between the right and left hands and encompassing a wide range. Figure 3.35 below is indicative of these features.

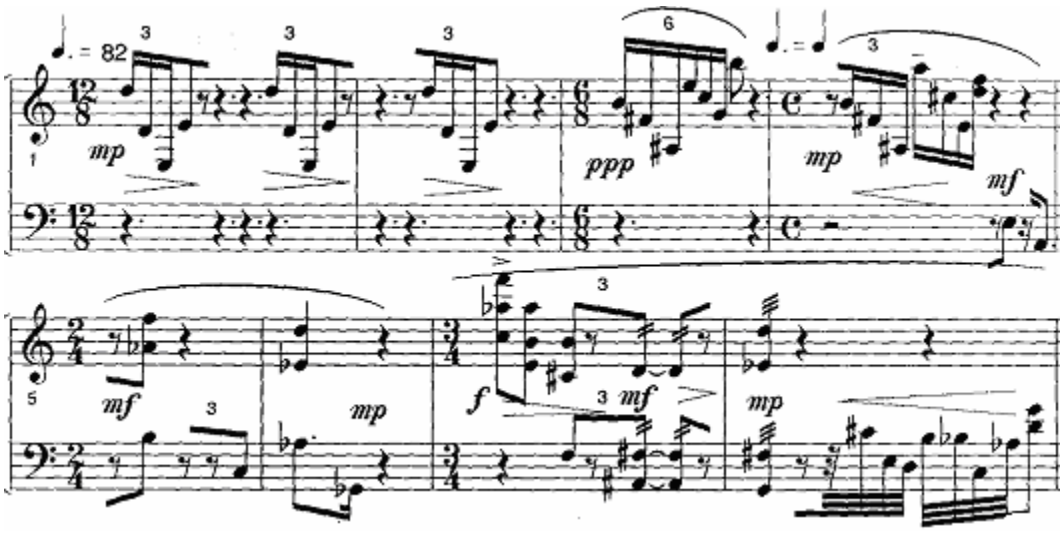


Fig. 3.35 *Brothers in Peace*, mm.1-8

Brothers in Peace, dedicated to Martin Luther King, Jr. and Mahatma Ghandi, exhibits no conventional formal structure as well. There is very little recurring material and no apparent harmonic unification. The overall structure of the piece is more a result of the combination of shorter individual sections, each displaying differing compositional techniques and each bearing an expression marking that functions almost like a title to a new "mini-movement" of sorts. For example, rehearsal letter A, shown above in figure 3.35, is repeated and then seems to conclude with a four note tremolo that decrescendos to nothing. This followed at letter B with a twenty measure section marked "With Determination" that employs mostly eighth-note triplet rhythms between the hands and slightly more homophony than in the opening section of the piece. This is followed by letter C, which is marked "With Fire", and contains ten measures of disjunct single-note lines followed by eight measures of right-hand sustained tremolo against a left-hand moving line in octaves.

This demarcation of sections within *Brothers in Peace* continues throughout. "With Patience in Conflict", at letter D, pits right hand against left in a "three against

two" fashion. Letter E, suddenly slower and marked "Seeing Beyond the Horizon", is written entirely in a chorale-style rolled section and is one of the few sections utilizing any tertian triadic harmony, loosely based around B-Flat Major. Letter F is also a sustained roll section, but exhibits more chromaticism, reflective of its expression marking "In the Eye of the Hurricane". It could be seen as part of a larger section along with letter E, as it concludes with a decrescendo tremolo on a B-Flat Major triad.

Letter G, which is suddenly faster, exhibits a rare instance of recurring material from letter A, but is quickly contrasted by letter H, a suddenly slower section using more block chords and a melodic figure based on the three-point turn that is similar to the arpeggio exercise in Chapter 2. (see Figure 3.36)

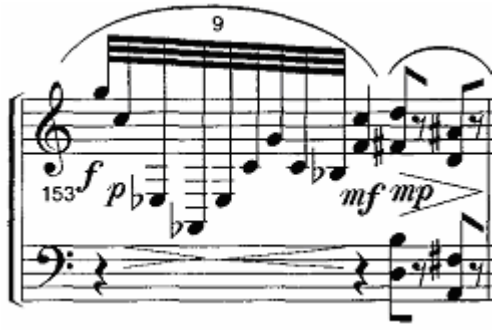


Fig. 3.36 *Brothers in Peace*, m. 153

This thirty-second note figure utilizes nearly the same sticking as the transcribed exercise in Chapter 2 (Figure 2.2). Here the sticking for the nine notes would be 4-3-2-1-2-4-3-4-2.

Both Martin Luther King Jr. and Mahatma Ghandi were of course, tragically killed by assassins. Indicative of its programmatic basis, the final section of *Brothers in Peace*, at rehearsal letter I and marked "Envisioning Freedom", consists of a sixteen measure sustained tremolo that in contrast to the majority of the piece, is of one of the few instances of triadic harmony. Evocative of a reverential mood, a progression of

rolled triads softly ascends heavenward to the highest note of the marimba, the pitch C7, which is the root of a C Major triad. In the last ten measures, a major third between the pitches *f* and *a* is sustained throughout in the right hand, while sporadic left-hand double-stops both confirm and deny the key of F Major as a final resting place. In measure 199, in what Ms. Spencer says is symbolic of the assassin's gunshots, two minor thirds, comprised of the conflicting pitches of *e-flat* and *g-flat*, are quietly sounded against the major third *f* and *a* tremolo in the right hand, which then fades to nothing [5].

With both *Brothers in Peace* and the two previously examined solos *Elim* and *The Emperors New Clothes*, I have chosen the umbrella term "later solos" with the obvious knowledge that Julie Spencer will surely compose many more marimba solos in the near future of course. And while at the time of this writing these three pieces are her most recently published solo marimba compositions, the heading is more indicative of a break with the compositional methods and style of the "Ask" solos, rather than an implication of a strict chronological timeline suggesting that Ms. Spencer's compositional output is in its twilight.

In these three solos to a large degree, Julie Spencer's compositional methods have come full-circle back to what was used in her earliest solos: fully composed pieces without a basis in or use of improvisation, little or no reliance on jazz harmony, and displaying no overt influences of world music or jazz. Yet they are indicative of current stylistic influences in Ms. Spencer's life, for though she still frequently performs improvised music and the music of other cultures, she has mainly performed as a freelance orchestral percussionist, in effect, as she says, coming "full-circle back to my Eastman roots" [5]. She cites these most recent playing experiences as a primary

influence on her compositional style in general and on these later solo compositions for marimba and her orchestral pieces in particular [5].

Summary and Conclusions

The solo marimba compositions of Julie Spencer are a natural reflection of her diverse and varied musical and philosophical background. They reflect her piano background, which caused her to question what the marimba could and could not do as a solo instrument. They reflect her early exposure to the marimba, which in turn led her to begin composing for the instrument at an early age, and to examine standard marimba technique, ultimately leading to her own unique refinements in that area.

Her lifelong interest in and commitment to improvisation has led to its inclusion in many of her pieces, not only in the solo marimba compositions but in a number of her chamber works as well. Similarly, many of these compositions exhibit elements of her interest in and study of world music techniques and jazz harmonies. These aspects of Ms. Spencer's music, found particularly in her music of the late nineteen-eighties and early nineteen-nineties, while they may have been a dissuading factor for many performers, were just as surely a compelling feature for many others, as it was for me.

Many of Ms. Spencer's pieces are strongly wedded to their programmatic issues. Her pieces are "never just pieces" [3], but reflect, among other things, the importance that spirituality plays in her life. It is my personal belief that a knowledge and understanding of the respective programmatic issues behind the pieces helps the performer to achieve a better informed and inspired performance.

One can see in this body of solo marimba literature, the continued growth and development of Julie Spencer's compositional style, from her earliest etude-like works

such as *Ice Cream*, through the deceptively simple lyricism of *After the Storm*, to the epic proportions of *Elim* and the harmonic complexity of *Brothers in Peace*.

Ms. Spencer's marimba compositions though are ultimately a reflection of her refinements of current two and four-mallet marimba technique. It is precisely her technique which has made the pieces possible, and her overall approach to playing the marimba is as important as the pieces themselves. One could choose, of course, to perform her solos without her techniques, though just as surely as one could use her techniques to aid in performing any of the other solo marimba literature that exists. Her collective umbrella of "Spencer Technique" encompasses her unique two-mallet horizontal approach to playing, with its foundation rooted in relaxed musculature. Her fundamental principle "that a relaxed muscle is easier to control than a tense muscle" [3] is transferred to her four-mallet techniques. It is what led her to develop her "Mallet Games", a systematic approach for strengthening the small muscle groups used when playing the marimba. It is what led to the development of her concept of the three-point turn, so prevalent in her compositions. It is with this over-arching goal of eliminating tension in her playing that led her to alter her grip with regards to her thumb positioning, which in turn enabled her to utilize extremely wide intervals between the mallets comfortably. This same degree of relaxation gave her the flexibility and freedom to develop a highly pianistic melody and accompaniment style, exhibited in so many of her works.

It is my hope that this document will not only help to address some of the unique technical issues inherent in these pieces, but that it may also perhaps encourage and inspire others to play and enjoy this body of music as I have. Yet even more importantly

I hope that other marimbists may be encouraged to incorporate some of the various aspects of Spencer technique into their own playing, regardless of whether they choose to play Julie Spencer's music or not, for I truly feel that my playing has been enhanced by the study of these techniques, and for that I am sincerely grateful.

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Vita

Eric Stephan Middleton was born in Hartford, Connecticut on March 19, 1960, the son of Serena Middleton and John Alan Middleton. After graduating in 1978 from Tates Creek High School, Lexington, Kentucky, he attended Morehead State University in Morehead, Kentucky. He graduated in spring of 1983 with the degree of Bachelor of Music. In the fall of 1991 he entered the Graduate School at the University of Nevada, Reno, and in May of 1993 he was awarded the degree of Master of Music from that institution. In the fall of 1995 he entered the Graduate School at the University of Texas to begin his doctoral studies.

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